

ONE-NINE-HUNDRED

Gotham Stories by Mary

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A MonkeyWench production

LOST

There are so many people here that he just wants to clap his hands over his ears and scream until they all leave him alone. People who shake his hand, or ruffle his hair, and say they're sorry like they mean it.

A woman who looks enough like Jason himself that she's probably an aunt or a cousin clasps him on the shoulder and calls him kid and lets him bum a cigarette off her. She says she's sorry, just like everyone else is, and tells him that his dad was a hell of a guy. She calls the Batman a fucking bastard and a murdering scumbag and Jason keeps his mouth shut, even though he wants to tell her that it wasn't the Batman's fault that one of the other guys on the museum job tried to shoot him and hit Jason's dad instead.

Later, when everyone's getting drunk, another woman finds him sitting on the edge of the swimming pool. He wants to dip his feet in, but thinks he's probably not supposed to take his good shoes off. He's only been to this house once before, back when his dad started working for Two-Face. It doesn't look quite so big this time. He's never been to a wake before, ever.

This new woman says that his dad was a hell of a guy, too, but doesn't offer a sorry so Jason likes her better. She says her name's Shiva, and asks where Jason's mother is.

"She... the hospital," he manages. "After we found out about dad, she got sick." He'd found her with the needle still in her arm.

"You ever need a place to stay, you call this," she says, and gives him a card. It's blank apart from the phone number on one side. "I owe your father that."

He tucks the card in his pocket, but doubts he'll call it. She looks at him like a teacher looking at an essay.

By the time that everyone's really drunk, and telling stories about his dad, Jason just wants to go home and sleep until everything's normal again.

A kid about his own age, a girl in a dress that looks about as comfortable as his suit is, comes over and sits next to him. She dips her fingers in the pool water, now lit up with those underwater bulbs that always make Jason think of electrocution accidents.

"My dad says your dad was -"

"A hell of a guy?" Jason guesses. She shakes her head.

"A real jerk, but otherwise okay, actually. He told me that they were buds in prison. Art and Will, two things that'll change the world."

Jason smiles, a little.

"I'm Stephanie. I'm supposed to ask if you want to come stay with me and my family, while your mom's sick." She makes a face. "But you'll have to share my room, so you'd better not fart too much or anything."

"Some friend of Two-Face's is picking me up later. Or his valet is. I didn't really pay attention," answers Jason, his voice sounding dull and tired to his own ears.

"Well, you can come stay with us if he's not cool, okay?"

"Kay. Thanks."

"Wanna go swimming?" she asks suddenly, kicking off her patent strap-shoes. "C'mon."

"These are my good clothes..."

"So? Who cares?"

Jason doesn't. Not about anything. He shrugs his jacket off, and jumps in after her.

The driver who picks Jason up doesn't say anything about the fact he's soaking wet, even though the car's a real expensive looking one. Jason could work out the make and model if the light was better and he wasn't so tired, but just watches the lights go past outside the window and wonders how long it'll be before he has to run away.

A teenage boy meets him at the new place. He's friendly and sympathetic-looking and Jason just wants to go to sleep.

"Hi, I'm Dick. Bruce is out of town at the moment, but he'll be back as soon as he can be. Do you want anything to eat before you go to bed? We've got a room set up for you."

Jason realises abruptly that he's really, really hungry. He hasn't eaten anything all day, not even any of the classy-looking catering at the wake.

Alfred, the driver, turns out to be the cook as well. He makes them both sandwiches and chocolate milk. Jason wishes Stephanie was there to hear his world-class burps, but Dick seems amused enough by them anyway.

"So what's this Bruce guy do? Is he in protection, or gunrunning, or fixing?" Jason asks as he gets stuck into his second plate of sandwiches. "If it's cars, I can help out a little. I'm good with tires."

Dick shakes his head, looking a little disturbed by the question. "Bruce isn't involved in anything like that."

Jason snorts. "Fine, don't tell me." A rich guy who's buddy-buddy enough with Harvey Dent to offer to take in a dead henchman's kid, and he's not into crime? Jason'll be believing in ghosts, next.

Someone's arranged for all his stuff to be brought over, which would be cool if it didn't remind Jason that he'll never be going home again. Even if his mom survives, she won't be in a position to look after him.

He peels off his wet funeral clothes and crawls into a bed that's too big and too soft.

It's obvious that Wayne's into *something*; there're rooms Jason's not allowed to poke around in, and Dick keeps pausing or talking cryptic when Jason gets in earshot. The more time Jason spends watching Alfred, the more his brain wants to scrub out 'butler' as the word which springs to mind and replace it with 'wetworks'. Something about the way the guy looks so cool no matter what he's doing.

Jason once told his dad that he wanted to be a hitman when he grew up. His dad had looked kinda funny, like he was sad and proud at the same time. Jason doesn't really want to be that, anymore, but isn't sure what else he'd like to be instead. He likes history; the French Revolution with all those gross bodies with no heads and the heads collected in baskets, or the Crusades. But 'liking history' isn't a job.

He doesn't bother poking around to find out the house's secrets, because he figures he'll find out

when he's meant to. They'll need him for something, right? Otherwise they wouldn't have taken him in.

The one thing he doesn't get is Tim. Tim lives down the street, and he's even younger than Jason is, but he comes over all the time and hangs out with Dick like they're best buddies. Tim's a rich kid, but -- unlike Dick -- Jason's willing to buy that his family's wealth is legit.

According to Tim, he met Dick when he was a really young kid, when Dick's real parents got killed. It was an extortion thing, which makes Jason feel bad for Dick. Money is a crappy reason for someone to die.

So Tim met Dick, and wanted his parents to adopt Dick, but this Wayne guy did instead, and Tim just kind of stuck around. Like he wanted to make sure Dick was okay.

Jason wants to say that it all sounds really gay, except that he understands. He thinks about Stephanie, sometimes, and sort of wants to check that she's okay, too. Maybe he's feeling the same thing Tim was.

One afternoon, when Dick and Tim are off doing one of the things that Jason's not supposed to know about (and doesn't *care* about, because if they want to have their shitty little *secrets* then he doesn't *care*), Jason thinks about calling Shiva. At least she seemed to want to do something with him.

Instead, he goes through the stuff still in boxes in his room until he finds his dad's address book. There's only one guy listed who could be an Art, like Stephanie said her dad was. Arthur Brown.

It's the first time he's used the phone at the house, and the dial tone makes his throat go dry. Every time he's heard it ring, he's been sure it's the hospital to say his mother's died. She's still in a coma. Jason tries not to think about it, but that doesn't work as well as he'd like.

Eventually someone picks up.

"H'lo?"

"Is Stephanie there?"

The guy swears loudly. "That little bitch. No, she ain't here, and if you know where I can track her down you'd better tell me quicksmart, kid. Haven't seen her for days."

Now Jason *knows* that he feels the same way that Tim did about Dick. He hangs the phone up without saying anything else and stares at it.

Then he writes down Arthur Brown's address, puts on his coat, and goes to steal one of Wayne's cars.

Maybe he should become a private eye. It only takes him the rest of the afternoon and half the night to think of checking the school.

"Stephanie?" Jason calls, stepping gingerly into a classroom. There's the remnants of a people-nest there, just like the ones Jason himself used to make in handy corners when he needed to rough it. Blankets, a backpack, and the leftovers of a meal. "Stephanie, are you here?"

Something stirs behind the teacher's desk and she stands, straggly-haired and surprised. "Jason?"

"Are you okay? I tried calling you, but some guy said you'd run away."

Her face twists into a snarl of disgust. "Yeah, he's a creep. Babysitter. My parents are away."

"Did he try to hurt you?" Jason can imagine himself killing somebody, if they'd hurt her. At least, he thinks he can.

"Um, no," she blushes, and glances away from him. Out the window, where the trees in the playground are stirring with night-time breezes. "He wanted to, you know. Do stuff."

"Oh." Yeah, he could commit murder. He's pretty sure of that. "You're okay?"

She shrugs. "I'm living on peanut butter sandwiches in a classroom. Your call."

"I've got a car. Well, it's not mine. But I've got it for now. If you want to drive somewhere."

She shrugs again, then nods. "'kay. Where should we go?"

Now it's his turn to shrug. "I dunno."

"Maybe we should just stay here, and go somewhere in the morning. I'm not sure I trust you to drive at this hour." Her mouth twists up into a smirk. "We could go on a road trip. See Metropolis."

They eat peanut butter sandwiches and drink flat soda out of paper cups, and talk about the time that Jason hid spider eggs in one of the unused mailboxes in his building's lobby and the baby spiders ran out everywhere and made everybody scream and freak out, and the time Stephanie bought a whole bunch of cheap plastic bracelets from a dime store and then sold them to kids at school as if they were jewels from one of her dad's heists.

And then, under blankets that smell a bit like school supply closets, they fall asleep.

The hand on his shoulder is gentle, but feels strange. When Jason blinks his eyes open and looks at it, he understands why -- it's wearing a glove.

"It's all right," Batman says quietly. "Come on, let's get you home."

"Can't go home," Jason corrects him, still feeling more than half asleep.

"Somewhere better than this, at least," Batman amends. Jason turns his head, taking in the fact that Stephanie and her backpack are gone.

"She's in the car already." Batman pulls him to his feet. Jason leans against the arm offered to him, allowing himself to be led through the dark halls. The school feels empty, haunted and sad. Jason doesn't want to be there anymore.

"Guess I'm busted, huh?" Jason sighs. "I never even met Bruce Wayne, and now he'll hate me for pinching his wheels."

"I'm sure he'll understand, if you explain."

"I know it wasn't your fault. My dad. Some lady at the funeral said it was. But I'm not sore at you. It's okay." Jason yawns, remembering too late to cover his mouth.

"It was a great shame, what happened to your parents. I'm sorry."

"So long as..." Jason yawns again. "You don't tell me that he was a hell of a guy. Wait." Feeling suddenly awake, he stops walking. Batman looks more than a little bit like a nightmare, but Jason swallows down his fear and looks up at him. "Stephanie can't go back to her house. The guy there's going to... he's bad."

"It's all right. You'll both be safe."

Batman's always been the monster in the dark, the creature that steals kids' parents away and gets them locked up, but maybe Jason's just too tired to care for the moment. He nods, and starts walking again.

"You're very young to have driven a car, Jason."

"I'm no kid." Of course, his voice sounds bratty and stupid when he says it, and he almost wants to laugh at himself.

"I never suggested you were." And now *Batman* sounds like he almost wants to laugh at him too, and Jason just gives up and sighs and coughs to cover a snicker.

"Am I the lamest crook you've ever caught?"

"No. You're competing with Crazy Quilt for that title, don't forget. And the Ventriloquist."

"Hey, I've met that guy, don't rag him," Jason protests. "He's frigging scary."

Batman pats him on the shoulder, and holds the door open for him. He can see the car parked ahead, the faint ghost of Stephanie's pale hair visible behind the windows.

"You promise you're not taking me to juvenile hall? Because I've got friends in high places." He doesn't, not that would spring him from juvie, but it sounds good to say.

"I promise," Batman answers, and Jason figures that he might as well believe the guy.

LOST (UNDER THE BIG TOP REMIX)

Steph is *hungry* and Daddy is *stupid* and she just wants to go out for burgers and fries like *ordinary* kids and Daddy is *STUPID*.

"You quit that screaming, or you're going back in the closet for another hour," he warns her, arm raised to slap down. Steph's not scared of slaps. They only hurt for a minute. She glares at him.

"NO! I WON'T QUIT SCREAMING! I'M GONNA TELL THE COPS WHAT YOU'RE DOING!" she yells shrilly. "YOU'RE GONNA GO TO JAIL FOREVER AND EVER AND EVER A-"

The slap knocks her down, and she grazes her knee on the worn-out carpet.

"You shut that little retard up," Daddy says to Mom. "Or you'll both regret it."

"Give me some money. I'll take her to the movies or something."

"I'm not giving you money. I already gave you money."

"It's gone. I hadta buy my pills. C'mon, another twenty. She'll be out of your hair all day."

Steph tried some of Mom's pills once. They made her feel gross and sleepy and then she puked up all over the place. Daddy was seriously mad that time. Mom wore sunglasses for a week afterward.

Now Mom pulls Steph back up to her feet. Steph glares at Daddy, but doesn't scream anymore. She's not scared of slaps, but she's not an idiot either.

"Come on, honey. Let's go out, huh? Just you and me."

"*You're* the retard," Steph spits at her father, walking to the front door. "I wish you were DEAD."

"You've been sulkin' all morning. Quit it," Dad tells Jason, smacking him on the back of his head as they drive.

"I don't *wanna* go to the circus." Jason crosses his arms and scowls out the windshield. "It's stupid."

"Thought kids liked the circus."

"Kids like Dads who aren't in jail all the time, too," Jason sneers. "And I know you're working a job, so quit the bonding bullshit."

Dad looks down at him like he's grown an extra eye in his head or something. "Do you talk like that to Catherine? I will break your jaw if you speak to your mother like that."

"No, sir."

"Good. I didn't raise you to be a punk to women."

"Didn't raise me at all."

"What was that?"

"Nothin'."

Being pissed off at Dad gets boring, so after a while Jason gives up. "What's the job, anyway?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

"Ah, one of *those* jobs," Jason says with a smirk. "Does that mean we get to go out somewhere fancy for dinner? When you do one of those never-you-minds, we always get to go out and get dressed up. Mom hocked her pearls, though. She'll have to wear that crappy locket I gave her for Christmas."

"Didn't I just tell you that you'd get yourself a crack on the chin if you kept talking shit, kid?"

"Sorry, Willis, I didn't know you counted as a woman. My mistake."

He gets another smack on the head for that, but it's worth it.

Steph's kinda bummed that they didn't go shopping or to the movies or anything, but the circus is pretty okay. She likes the leotards the

acrobats wear. She's gonna do gymnastics when she's old enough, so she can wear stuff like that. And the lion is kinda cool too. Steph's just read those Narnia books, but this lion doesn't look like it can talk or bring people back to life or anything.

There are a couple of other kids, but they're all dressed up nice so she knows she's not supposed to smile or say hi or anything. She does anyway, to one little boy who looks like he might be friendly. He doesn't notice her. He's watching the acrobats. One of them's a kid, too, but a grown-up kid.

At the intermission break Mom lets her get a whole plate of mashed potatoes and a giant soda, and Steph can't remember the last time she felt so happy. She doesn't even feel all that mad at Daddy, anymore.

When Jason sees the little vial of acid in his Dad's pocket, he can *feel* his eyes go wide.

"That is *so awesome*. Can you burn my hand so it looks like Dent's face?"

"Are you high, kid? Of course I'm not burning your fucking hand."

"Aw, c'mon. Please? Just a drop. One drop. Please, please, please."

"No. And come on, we gotta go."

"What? It's only intermission!"

Jason's Dad smirks. "Thought you didn't give a shit about the circus."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's okay."

"Maybe next time you won't be so quick to shoot your mouth off. But no, we're leaving now. I've been thinkin' about what you might end up seeing, and I don't want to stick around for it."

Jason rolls his eyes. "I've seen bodies before, Dad."

"Quit pissing around and get up now, and I'll put a drop on your hand. Deal?"

"A drop, *and* you let me bum a cigarette."

"Fine, fine. Hurry up."

Jason loves it when he wins against his Dad.

Mom's trying to get pills off this totally gross-looking guy in a coat who keeps *looking* at Steph and telling Mom how *pretty* Steph is, so Steph sneaks around to listen outside the tent until the show starts again. A boy a little bit older than her and a guy who's probably his dad are smoking and prodding the animal shit on the straw-strewn ground with the toes of their shoes, which is the kind of disgusting thing guys are always doing.

"That really fucking hurt," the boy's saying, rubbing his hand. There's a big red burn spot just below the knuckles.

"What'd you expect, Jay? It's *acid*."

"Don't call me Jay."

"Why not? Everybody does."

"Yeah, everybody five years ago. Jeez, Dad. It's not like I stay the same age while you're in jail, y'know."

"Hey," says Steph, going up to them. "Can I have a cigarette?" She doesn't really like smoking, but she wants somebody to talk to. And if Mom gets shitty at her, she'll just threaten to tell Daddy that Mom got more pills.

"Sure." The dad gives her one. "What's your name, little lady?"

"Steph. Stephanie Brown."

"Art's girl?"

"Yup." She smiles. Her Dad's *famous*.

"I swear, you kids are all growing up too damn fast. Seems like just a coupla months ago you were all in nursery school. I remember when your were *born*, Steph-Stephanie-Brown. Your dad was handing out cigars to everyone in the wing, even the guards and the warden. Then he got real drunk that night on that moonshine shit we'd get, and started crying about how hard this world could be for girls. He wanted a son, because boys get it easier."

Steph blinks, and coughs a little on the smoke. She didn't know any of that stuff.

"And you -" the dad turns to his own kid. "When *you* were born, your mom was out cold. She'd had one of those things. Cesarean. You'd got yourself all tangled in your cord, so they had to cut you out. So I was the first one who got to hold you. You were this tiny, gory little thing, an' you were screamin' and screamin'."

He looks off with a little smile on his face, like he's remembering it and really liking the memory, until his kid makes a 'huh' kinda noise.

"That's weird," the boy says. "'Cos I've seen Mom in a bikini, and I didn't see a scar."

"Oh." The dad clears his throat. "They do 'em a special way, so's you don't." He coughs a bit. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I just got caught up in storytelling."

"I'm Jason," the boy tells Steph, and holds out his un-burned hand. She's about to shake it when the screaming starts from inside the tent.

It's hours before they can get away unnoticed. Jason hasn't said much.

"You okay, kid?" Dad asks as they drive home.

"Yeah."

"Hand still hurtin'?"

"Oh." Jason had forgotten it. "Yeah. I guess."

"Your mom can put a plaster on it when we get back."

"Kay."

Dad glances over at him. Jason tries to smile. It doesn't really work.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you know there was a kid? When you took the job?" The kid hadn't died, but he'd seen his parents die. Which was just as bad, in a weird sort of way.

Dad's quiet for nearly a mile. "Yeah, Jay, I did."

"Don't call me Jay."

"Sorry. Forgot." Dad takes a deep breath. "So, which restaurant should we take your mother to? How about that steak place you like, huh?"

Jason's not all that hungry, but Dad looks hopeful and pathetic and Jason feels tireder than he ever has before. "Sounds great," he manages. "Mom will be excited."

The kid will be okay, Jason tells himself. It's not so bad, when there isn't anyone to look after you. It's not like it kills you or anything.

"Dad?" Steph asks, sitting on the couch beside him. "Is it okay if I watch TV with you for a while?"

"Thought you wanted me dead," he retorts, shifting to make room. "Not so high-and-mighty anymore?"

"I was just angry," she says, because she's not *sorry* exactly. "You know I didn't mean it."

"How was the movies?"

"What?"

"You and your mom. See something funny?"

Steph shrugs. "Mom let me flip a cop off, when we were on the bus home. He shook his fist at me."

Daddy chuckles. "That's my girl."

"What happens to kids whose parents die?"

He turns the TV off with the remote and looks hard at her. "I ain't dying, Stephanie. I know the jobs I go on get pretty hairy sometimes, but you and your mom don't have to ever worry about that. 'Kay? Just sayin' you want me dead isn't gonna make anything bad happen later, I swear."

She wants to say *no, that's not what I meant*, but his eyes are looking at her like he's happy that she's worried about him, which kinda means he cares what she thinks about stuff.

So she just says "'kay, Daddy," and leans against him while they watch TV.

NEVER MEANT TO BE

The first time Sheila feels like a mother is the moment when she walks in her front door, after a double shift at the clinic, and sees her child pulling on another woman's hair.

Jason's one year and a handful of weeks old, so Sheila's long given up on blaming her dislike of the

kid on adjustment or post-natal depression. Some people aren't meant to be mothers, and it's just a shame that Willis was so keen on the idea of a son that she let herself be talked into carrying to term.

And there he is, her boy, all smiles and big eyes and inquisitive fingers, being bounced in Catherine Johnson's arms and making little burbling noises as he grabs to tug at her dark curls.

Until now, the women have managed to avoid meeting face-to-face, as if pretending the other did not exist would somehow make it true.

Sheila walks over, letting the door fall closed in a slam behind her, and grabs Jason from Catherine's arms. He begins to squall and cry immediately, wriggling in her grasp.

"Where's Willis?" Sheila asks coldly, over her son's screams.

"Out for cigarettes." Catherine's voice is soft and fearful, like she's scared Sheila's going to throw a punch. Sheila's never even heard her speak before; until now, the closest thing to conversation between them have been the small surprised gasps Catherine gives when she phones and Sheila's the one to answer. A gasp, and then the click of disconnection.

Just like she was never meant to be a mother, Sheila knows she was born to something better than to be the wronged woman in a cliched extramarital affair.

"Mommy," Jason wails, and Sheila holds him tighter. Catherine might have her kitten-claws in Willis, but Sheila will die before she'll let someone like that take her son as well. She may not love him, but he's hers.

She turns, grabs her bag from where she tossed it onto an armchair, and opens the door onto the hallway again. Jason, confused enough by the proceedings that he's stopped crying for the moment, jams his thumb into his mouth and bites. He never wants a pacifier, but seems content enough to gnaw at himself when he needs distraction.

"We're buying land in Virginia," Catherine says, pleadingly, as Sheila moves to close the door behind her. "My father had some money. I'll adopt Jason. You can go to England. Willis said you've always wanted to go. You could study again."

Sheila stops, her knuckles white on the doorknob. No baby, no cheating lover. England. She's wanted it ever since she was a child.

She'll never be a doctor if she stays in Gotham, and the loss of that dream still smarts even though she feels useful and content working reception at the Park Row clinic.

It seemed like things would be okay, when she found the clinic. Until the phone calls, and the new and guilty gleam to Willis' eyes. And Jason, growing out of his clothes faster than they could afford them. Always hungry. Always needing something Sheila doesn't know how to provide him with.

"You'll be back," Sheila says to Catherine coolly, reshouldering her bag and hefting Jason onto her hip. "This city doesn't let you leave. Not for long."

Then she turns, and takes her son with her into the night.

Elena is one of those earnest, perky teenagers who doesn't mind babysitting for a pittance, because

she "just *loves* little babies", and Sheila mutters a prayer to whoever's up beyond the low-hanging Gotham clouds for someone like that coming into her life.

And for Leslie, too. The pay at the clinic's not enough to keep a woman and her child living comfortably, so Leslie finds Sheila a place in the mail and records department at Gotham General Hospital. In return, Sheila volunteers her time at the clinic free of charge whenever she can.

"You don't have to do this, Sheila. It's all right," Leslie tells her time and time again, in a flat tired voice, scrubs flecked with blood and deep crow's feet spidering out from her eyes. "You've got a baby at home. Spend your time with him."

"I'd rather be here," Sheila answers. Leslie doesn't have anything to say to that.

One day, Elena's knocked out with a bad case of the flu, and Sheila calls everyone she can think of short of Catherine and Willis before admitting defeat and taking Jason in to work with her.

She's avoided doing this for as long as she can, even though the hospital's staff childminding service seems lovely. Work's where she goes to forget about the screaming, smelly, sticky creature who looks up at her from his crib like she's the most wonderful thing he's ever seen. Work's where she can pretend she's free.

When her shift's done, she goes to collect Jason. A headache's building behind her eyes and she can tell that she'll wind up with Elena's flu before the end of the week. Great. Just what she needs.

A small, slim woman in a lab coat and a neat skirt and blouse ensemble is playing pat-a-cake with

Jason on the brightly printed carpet. Her blonde hair's perfectly styled and her smile is bright and friendly.

"You're the mommy, huh?"

Sheila nods.

"He's just the cutest little thing I've ever seen," the woman goes on, squeezing Jason's hands in delight. Sheila scowls. Jason hates it when people do things like that; he likes having his arms free to grab and reach.

"I suppose so," Sheila answers noncommittally. "Have we met?"

"Oh, no, I don't think we have. Harley Quinzel. I work upstairs in psych."

"Do you have any children?" Sheila asks, bending to pick Jason up. Harley makes a small movement, almost like she's going to stop Sheila from taking him.

The focus in her gaze makes Sheila think of the addicts who wind up in the clinic. Something obsessive and uncontrolled hiding behind the smile.

"Not yet. I can't imagine that there's ever going to be a baby as wonderful as your little Jay," Harley says with a laugh. "He's lovely."

Jason bites on his thumb and pulls on Sheila's hair.

"I'd better get him home. Nice to meet you," Sheila says after a beat.

"Bring him back soon, huh?"

Sheila just nods, suddenly anxious to get away. The elevator arrives quickly, and she hits the button for the parking lot level with relief. Maybe Leslie can help her find somewhere to send Jason on the future days when Elena can't help out.

Jason looks up at her, his eyes quizzical. There's a pale lipstick print on his forehead. Sheila rubs it away with the hem of her sleeve.

"She gave me the creeps," she says, as if she owes him an explanation. "Women like her love too much. It makes them dangerous."

Then she snorts. "I guess halfway between her and me would be a perfect mom for you, huh?"

Jason just rests his head against her breast, and falls asleep.

The store was packed, just like it always is on Saturday afternoons, and Sheila's feet are aching from standing in cheap shoes by the time she gets home with the week's groceries.

The door to the apartment is unlocked and slightly ajar, and her stomach does a flip of fear at the sight. They live in a pretty good neighborhood, now, but there are still break-ins from time to time.

Jason's been taught to be careful about opening the door, but that kid never listens to what anyone says, especially when it's Sheila doing the saying.

He's sitting at the kitchen table, drinking soda from a can with a straw. Sheila never lets him have Zesti - the last thing he needs is sugar and caffeine in his system - and he's slurping away happily. Listening with wide eyes to the man sitting in the other beat-up wooden chair.

"Your Dad was a good guy. He took a beating for me one time, and I owe him for that. I don't forget my debts, even when a fella gets himself shot by coppers in a heist. You ever need anything, you come see me, y'hear?"

God, his *face*...

"Get out of my house," Sheila tells Harvey Dent coldly. "Now."

He just smirks at her, standing slowly and clapping two hands on Jason's shoulders. "See you around."

Jason grins up at him. "Thanks for the sodas."

As soon as he's out of the door, Sheila slams it and puts the chain on. Then she storms back into the kitchen. Jason slurps the last of his drink through his straw.

"You didn't tell me my Dad was dead," he says before Sheila can start yelling.

The reports of the shooting were all over the back pages of the paper a week earlier. Sheila had sworn a little, and remembered Willis' hands and smile, and then made herself forget. She grits her teeth. "Because I didn't want you to end up in the same shit that got him killed. Why the hell would you let a creep like that into the house, you little idiot?"

"Guess I was born bad," he sneers back. He's not tall, for a ten-year-old, but Sheila can tell already that he'll have the same bruiser's build as Willis when he's grown up. "Maybe I should take him up on it, y'know?"

"Don't give me that." She smacks him hard on the head. "You stay away from those mobs and gangs, you hear me? I'll hit you so hard Leslie'll be picking your teeth out of your cheek for hours, if you mess with that."

"Why the hell do you care? You'd be happy if I croaked!" He glares at her with eyes which look more like her father's every day.

"Since your chief joy in life seems to be making me miserable, I'd've thought you'd do anything to stay alive!" she snaps back. "Go to your room, Jason."

"Fuck you! I didn't fucking do anything! You're the bitch who didn't tell me my father was dead!"

"He was no good to you alive! I'm the one who buys your clothes, who paid for the food in those bags there! You give me a little goddamn respect!"

"Whatever." He heads for the front door.

"You get back here!"

"Make me, *Mommy*," he says, with a slam for punctuation.

She puts the food away, and has a cigarette, and wonders idly if Jason's out causing trouble bad enough to land him a stint in juvenile hall. She could do with the holiday.

At three in the morning the sound of a knock on the door wakes her, and she eases herself back up from where she finds herself slumped over the table. She hates the way gin makes her feel after the fact; that's why it's the bottle she picks off the shelf at the liquor store. If she liked it, she'd let herself have too much, too often.

Jason's standing there, collar curled in the gauntleted hand of a teenage boy in a cape and a mask.

"I think this belongs to you," the teenage boy says with a smirk that's more friendly than not.

"What's he done now?" Sheila asks with a sigh. First Two-Face and now this.

"He was shoplifting a microwave pizza roll from a seven-eleven," the kid in the cape says. Jason struggles to get his shirt out of the boy's grip,

scowling at Sheila like she's the scum of the world. "He has to go back and do janitor work for them for a week, or else they press charges."

"I was framed!" Jason protests, wriggling free. "They're all against me."

"Isn't it past your bedtime, Jason?" the kid asks. It's a taunt, but Sheila can see lines of real worry on his brow.

"Isn't it past yours?" Jason shoots back, pushing past Sheila and walking into the house, muttering as he goes. "Won't even let a guy mind his own business. Stupid nosy assholes."

Stifling a yawn, Sheila nods at the boy. "Thanks for bringing him home. Robin, right?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

He nods and turns to go. It's strange to see him walking down the hallway of their apartment level. It makes him real in ways a figure like that isn't supposed to be.

Jason's sitting on the threadbare couch in front of the television, arms crossed and scowl firmly in place.

Sheila feels very, very tired. "We don't even own a microwave. What were you planning to do, just glare at your dinner until it burst into flames?"

"You shoulda told me my Dad was dead." He looks up at her now, eyes bright with pain behind their habitual hardness.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I'm sorry."

"Letting me find out from that freak like that..."

Sheila feels like reminding him which one of them it was who let the freak into the house, but instead settles for sighing. "Okay, you get the points

for this round. Want some waffles? Early Sunday breakfast."

"Can I have coffee?"

"No."

"I'm practically an orphan!"

She's tired, and a little tipsy, and a little hungover, and all she can do is smile. "Forget it, kiddo."

"You're the worst mom ever."

"That makes us a matched set, then."

She's not quite sure what exactly it is that makes her start noticing the little things about Jason, but one day Sheila looks at him and realizes that she's got no clue who this person her son's turned into is.

He goes to school and gets okay grades and says he wants to do paramedical training when he's graduated. He doesn't drink, and usually remembers to pay her back for the smokes he swipes out of her bag. On weekends, he hangs out at the clinic with Leslie, but never offers more than a shrug and a "fine" when Sheila asks how things are there.

She doesn't have time to do volunteer work anymore. She's working all the hours she can at the hospital, and saving up her money. Some day, when Jason's got a place of his own, she's going to see England.

He gets into fights, but never bad enough to earn more than a letter home and a detention or two.

Sometimes Sheila looks at him and wonders how the hell he managed to turn out so good. Sometimes she looks at him and wonders what's going on in that head of his.

So she's not surprised, exactly, when she walks into the kitchen to get a drink from the tap late one night and is greeted by the sight of her eighteen-year-old son making out with a kid in a black cape and green tights. It seems just as likely as any of the other unexpected things Jason does, somehow.

There's a bottle of antiseptic, and some bandages, and stitching equipment, and three cereal bowls on the countertop. Two of the bowls have the remnants of cocoa puffs and milk in them, and the third has a splatter of blood and two bullets, lying like a surreal still life against the white of the china.

Sheila tries to think of something to say. After a few seconds, she gives up and just clears her throat.

Jason breaks away from Robin's mouth, looks over at her, and falls back against the fridge with a groan of annoyance. "Mom, your timing sucks."

"I guess this means I don't have to worry about some poor girl knocking on the door and telling me you got her in the family way, at least," she says, folding her arms.

This Robin's mouth seems as prone to frowning as the other's was smiling, and it's almost funny to see such a serious expression on the face of a short kid with spiky hair and a mask. "Ms Haywood, I -"

"Go home, kid. Or wherever it is that your sort lives." She waves him away. "I'd like to have a little chat with my son."

Jason scrubs a hand through his hair and sighs. He's wearing a worn Gotham Knights t-shirt and boxers. A couple of bruises from a recent brawl at school trace a broken line down his calves.

"It's cool. You get home. Lemme know if the stitches pull, 'kay?"

Robin nods, once, and climbs out through the narrow kitchen window. Sheila can hear a whirl and a distant thunk, and then the boy vanishes into the dark outside.

"It's most certainly *not* cool. How long has this been going on?"

"What, you mean me and Robin?"

"No, I mean sneaking around behind my back and playing field surgeon to vigilantes, you little shit." She pushes past him, switching the kettle on and reaching for the instant coffee. "You didn't use up all the milk on your midnight feast for two, I hope."

"There's another carton on the door. Look, it's not... I mean, it's just... you've known for years that Leslie helps them out. Why're you getting at me for doing the same thing?"

"Because Leslie isn't my responsibility, and she doesn't do it in my goddamned kitchen. You think the game they're playing is any different to the mess that got your father killed?"

"We're not 'playing' anything, Mom." Jason gets down two mugs, and puts sugar in one. He's going to rot his teeth out, one of these days.

"How long?"

Jason sighs again, shoulders dropping tiredly. He's broad and tanned, not quite as tall as Sheila expected him to become. "Remember when the Police Commissioner's daughter got shot?"

Sheila nods. She knew the Joker, once, in a life so far in the past it feels like it's something she read about. And, after that poor girl got hurt just so the Joker could piss off her father, Sheila started to have nightmares about what could happen if the Joker

ever decided to look her up. She'd wake up in a cold sweat, and have to go check that Jason was okay before she could sleep again.

"Yes," she says, pouring the hot water over the coffee and sugar in the mugs. "I remember."

"A little while after that."

"Jesus." Sheila rubs at her eyes, and follows when Jason carries the cups to the table. "You know, in all the things I thought I should be worried about, it never crossed my mind that you might've been hanging out with Batman and Robin."

"Actually, Robin didn't show up until I'd been helping Leslie for a few months."

"I'm afraid of what you'll say if I dare ask how old that kid is, Jason."

"He's just little for his age." Jason smiles as he takes a sip of his coffee. "Thanks for not tearing strips off me for this."

"Don't think I'm not mad as hell," Sheila says coldly, wondering if it's worth the effort of going into the bedroom to get her cigarettes. "But it's not like that's ever stopped you doing anything before. Just don't get yourself in trouble, all right? I can still smack you hard enough to make it hurt."

"I'll do my best," Jason promises.

She goes to work, and does the grocery shopping, and tries to read the newspaper without feeling sick at every mention of Gotham's urban-legend night population.

It was bad enough sitting at home when Willis was out on the job, back when Sheila was young and stupid and thought she didn't care about life and

death. Now, the world looms outside, terrifying and dangerous.

She lingers at the hospital after her shift, watching every patient brought into the emergency fear and wondering if they're someone Jason knows.

The cafeteria is half-full in the small hours of the night, same as any other time. The lights draw color out of people's faces and make them into pale, shell-shocked zombies. Eating bad food with mechanical bites and swallows as they wait for news, or for their rotation to begin, or for something to happen.

Sheila sits down at a corner table and rests her head on her hands. It's been two weeks since she found out, and it still hasn't sunk all the way in.

"You look like I feel," a voice says. It's one of the physical therapists, a woman Sheila knows well enough to smile hello to in the halls but nothing more than that.

"You must feel pretty rotten, then," Sheila answers. "Dana, right?"

"Yeah. Mind if I sit?" She's holding a tray with a bottle of orange juice and a slightly desiccated-looking apple on it.

"Not at all. You know what they say about misery and company."

"Mm." Dana sits down, and starts cutting her apple with a plastic fork. "I didn't feel like eating alone."

"I could do with a distraction from my head, too," Sheila agrees. "You got any kids?"

Dana nods, swallowing a thin wedge of fruit. "A stepson. He's sixteen."

"Ever felt like committing a little infanticide?"

"If you'd asked me a week ago, I'd've said no." Dana shakes her head. "But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the stuff my husband found in his room three nights ago. Now I can't decide if I want to cling to him, or kick him from here to Metropolis and back for being so reckless with his life."

Drugs. Sheila has a moment of thankfulness that she's never had to worry about Jason getting mixed up in that shit, at least. "That's terrible. I'm sorry."

"He says he's done with it now, but how do you trust someone when you know how much they've lied to you?" Dana asks, her food forgotten, her eyes imploring Sheila to say something sense-making.

Sheila shrugs. "I don't know. I think I trust my boy, and he's kept secrets since he was old enough to talk. Didn't even tell me he was a... you know." She lets her hand fall limp at the wrist.

Personal trauma wars with interest in gossip on Dana's face for a moment. Gossip wins. "Really? How did you find out?"

"Walked in."

Dana covers a gasp with her hand. "Wow. That's... hardcore."

Sheila snorts. "Luckily for my sanity, they were only at softcore when I interrupted."

When Dana laughs, it sounds like she's only just remembered how.

On Friday night, Sheila drinks too much gin with not enough tonic and feels lonely and bored. She wonders if Matches is in town; he's got no fixed phone number and only bothers calling her when he's lonely and bored himself.

It's not that she hates her life, just that England can't come fast enough.

She's digging through the milk carton holding her old records, looking for Marianne Faithfull's *Broken English*, when Jason lets himself in the front door with a guest in tow.

It's a boy who looks about fourteen but who Jason will most likely claim is just small for his age, slightly built and dark-haired.

"Mom, this is Tim," Jason says. "We're gonna hang out and watch some TV on the set in my room, okay?"

"Are you -?" Sheila asks, letting the question hang. She didn't get a good look at Robin, but it's not out of the realm of possibility that this kid could get his hair looking like a stealth pineapple if he tried.

He gives her an oddly bleak smile. "I'm nobody, ma'am."

"We met at first aid class," explains Jason.

So her son's a serial cradle snatcher, as well as a fag. She sure did raise him right.

Not wanting to risk overhearing the two of them, Sheila spends the evening wandering the neighborhood. Winter's coming in, sharp and hard this year.

"She realized she'd never drive through Paris, in a sports car, with the warm wind in her hair..." she hums to herself, thinking of how sad that song had sounded when she was Jason's age. Now it just sounds honest.

Another week goes by, and she's woken up at two a.m one night by Jason saying "Will you keep the volume down? My mom's asleep."

"Sorry," a young, female voice whispers in reply. Sheila strains to catch the words through the thin walls. "We've gotta do something."

"Yeah, but what?"

"Well, I was thinking... I bet if you rocked up to the Cave, he'd let you in. Take you on."

"Robin's forced to quit, and your brilliant fix-it plan is to stick me in a cape. That's some great logic work there, Steph. You should pat yourself on the back for that one."

"No need to be an asshole about it. I bet you don't have any better ideas."

"Since you're so set on the idea that Batman needs a sidekick, why not apply for the position yourself?"

A high laugh, the sound of someone nearing desperation. "Okay, and now back to *reality*... what're we going to do? We can't let this happen. What's Gotham gonna do without Robin? What's *Tim* gonna do without Robin?"

There's a pause, which goes on for so long that Sheila's starting to think they must've left via Jason's window, before he speaks again. "Right. So. Batman's going through one of his phases of pretending you don't exist, and he just goes grim and broody whenever I say anything about Tim. We can't do much on our own, so who else is there?"

"The Titans," the girl's voice answers. "Superboy and Robin are like this."

Sheila assumes there's a gesture, probably of crossed fingers or clasped hands, which accompanies the words.

"Tim says Superboy tracked him down already," says Jason. "They had a fight about this whole thing. About Tim having to quit."

The girl snorts. "Of course they did. What about Nightwing?"

"He's doing that 'this is sad but inevitable' mopey thing."

A growl of frustration. "This sucks."

"I know."

"Wanna come be my backup on a patrol?" It's not flirtation in her voice, but something a little like it.

"I think I promised my mom I wouldn't do stuff like that unless I had to..."

"That doesn't sound like a 'no', Jase. Last one to the library roof has to buy breakfast!"

There's a scuffling sound and then silence.

Sheila tries to go back to sleep.

She attempts to convince herself that the quiet that's settled over the apartment is the sound of her son sleeping safely in his bed.

She fails on both counts.

The sun is rising as she lights her third cigarette, tapping the ash on the sill of her kitchen window so that it drifts out onto the lazy breeze and blends into the smog.

England seems impossible, abstract. Like going to the moon, or back in time. A place read about in stories but never visited.

Jason thinks he's so grown up and smart and tough. Sheila knows that, because she felt just the

same when she was his age, and look where cockiness landed her.

If she leaves him now, there might be nothing for her to come back to.

She stubs the butt of her cigarette out and lights another, and waits for her son to get home.

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Leslie takes one look at him and says "Blanket. Now", and goes to put the kettle on.

It's still raining buckets outside, and Jason's shirt is wet enough that it's clinging to him like an icy second skin. He snuffles a little, and sneezes once, as he peels it off.

"Put sugar in it!" he calls to Leslie, grabbing one of the spare blankets out of the supply room.

"Hush. Don't wear your throat out," she says, stepping out of the clinic's kitchenette with a mug of lemon tea in one hand. "Here. Sip this, and sit quietly, and hope to high heaven that you haven't caught something."

Rain drips off his hair and lands in the drink with a faint plinking noise. Leslie sighs.

"If I bought you an umbrella, would it see any use?"

Jason grins. "Nah. But it'd be great for stirring up the pigeons outside my bedroom window. I threw my math book at them yesterday and they went crazy."

"And where's the math book now?"

He shrugs, which makes the blanket slip a little on his shoulders. It's a faded mustard color, with several spots where it's been darned in contrasting colors. "Out the window somewhere, I guess."

She's looking at his shoulder. Oh, crap. Jason pulls the blanket in closer around him.

"Fighting again, Jason?" Leslie asks tiredly. "I hoped that you'd have grown out of that by now."

He'll be fifteen in a week. He's been dropping hints about wanting a baseball glove, but knowing Leslie he'll end up with a bunch of books about important historical figures and a set of pre-bought movie tickets at some arty place where the popcorn stand doesn't stock anything fun or multicolored.

The bruise a few inches above his armpit is a pretty awful one, all dark and ragged-edged and fevered-looking. It doesn't hurt anymore.

"Hey, no scolding the sick guy," he protests, and coughs weakly for show. Leslie doesn't look mollified.

"Go lie down. Get some sleep before you walk home in this torrent, at least."

He's tired and achy and cold, so he goes without further protest. The beds here aren't the comfiest in the world, but they're clean and dry and the clinic's pretty quiet for a Wednesday evening.

Falling asleep isn't something he planned on doing, but he was up most of the night before fighting with his mom again and then got litter duty during recess for sassing his English teacher. The bustle of the clinic always soothes him, which should be weird but isn't. He and his mom move around a lot, but the clinic never changes much. There's even a set of little lines marking how tall

he's been over the years, on the doorframe of the staff kitchenette, and if that doesn't make it home then Jason doesn't know what home is.

He wakes up and tries to guess what time it is before looking at his watch. He guesses eleven, but it's twelve thirty-five already. His mom'll be pissed at him for being out late without calling.

The door to Leslie's office is shut. That only happens when she's really serious about being left undisturbed, but Jason figures that if she really didn't want him barging in then she wouldn't have given him a key. He wears it on the long chain around his neck, along with the key of his apartment and a cool-looking fang tooth he found in the park a few years ago.

"Leslie, I'm gonna go -" he starts to say as he opens the door and steps inside. "Oh. Hi."

Batman just nods at him. Leslie's searching through one of the filing cabinets, and doesn't look up. "There are some flannel shirts in the cabinet by the window, Jason. You can tell Sheila I kept you in until the rain stopped."

Jason nods, which is sort of useless since she isn't looking at him, and pulls the blanket up again.

It's not even like it's the first time he's seen Batman or anything. Everyone who spends any regular time at the clinic has at least caught a glimpse at some point. It's just that he's never been close enough to get a real look.

Leslie pulls an x-ray free from one of the files, and hands it across to Batman. "See what you're looking for?"

He holds it up to the light, glances at it, and hands it back. "Yes."

Jason stares. It's like watching the Terminator, or a cowboy played by Clint Eastwood, or something. Batman is *that* cool.

"Jason?" Leslie says, in that same tone she uses when she asks him how long he's been watching the TV in the waiting area when he's supposed to be doing his homework.

He walks across the room to the cabinet where Leslie keeps the stuff kids - usually Jason - might need. There're shirts and jeans and energy bars and food vouchers, and info sheets about local shelters and soup kitchens.

The skin on his back prickles under the blanket, like he's being watched, but when Jason looks over his shoulder Batman is looking at Leslie.

"Uh, see you later, I guess," Jason says after a couple of seconds, heading for the door.

"Where do you live?" Batman asks.

Jason blinks in surprise. "Not far. Two train stops. No big deal."

"The streets are dangerous tonight. I'll drive you."

Jason tries to keep himself from smiling. The grim, serious thing is cool when it's being used for detective stuff, but in conversation it's a little silly. "Aren't the streets dangerous every night?"

Batman makes a little 'hm' sound, which Jason thinks probably means he's amused. Leslie's giving them both a hard look, but Jason can't tell what this one means, so he doesn't let it bother him.

"Lemme just grab my bag," Jason says, and leaves the office. He folds the blanket and puts it beside the pillow he slept on, then puts on the shirt Leslie said he could take. It's a little big for him,

which means he's likely to get another growth spurt soon. Leslie always knows when it's time to get larger clothes ready for him. Jason calls it her secret doctor superpower.

Batman's car is parked a block down the street, in a side-alley. It's a damn fine machine, and Jason can't help but give a low whistle of approval. Batman holds the passenger door open for him, which makes Jason wonder what sort of horrible burglar-alarm traps get triggered if the wrong person touches it. He's heard a bunch of stories about the Batman at school, but never anything about anybody getting fried by his wheels.

For a couple of minutes, Jason's too awed to do anything more than give basic directions to his neighborhood, sitting quietly with his hands on his knees. Then Batman glances over at him, at the splits and scars on his knuckles, and asks "You're a fighter?"

"Aw, man," Jason sighs. "This is as bad as the time Robin chewed me out for stealing a Hot Pocket. Don't you guys have anything better to do than appear in my own personal after-school specials?"

"It was a question, not an accusation. How old are you, Jason?"

"Nearly fifteen."

"Hm," Batman says, and this time it sounds like he's thinking hard about something. He doesn't say anything else for the rest of the drive.

A month later, the Police Commissioner's daughter gets shot by the Joker, and Jason's mom starts checking on him in the middle of the night.

With her so nervy, he can't hang out at the clinic as much, but even so it's hard for him to miss how much more often Batman's showing up.

"He's getting hurt a lot, huh?" Jason asks one morning, when he stops in on the way to school and finds Leslie sitting at her desk with her head in her hands.

She nods, and lets out a long breath. "Yes."

"Teach me how to help you."

This gets her sitting up. "What?"

"If things are worse, you need more help. Right? So teach me. I already know my way around this place better than anyone."

It's way against the law to let an unqualified teenager do stuff like administer IVs and stitch up cuts, so at first Leslie is kind of reluctant, but Jason knows he can wear her down.

And, after a couple of weeks, Leslie starts using words like 'triage' and phrases like 'needs must', which means he's won the battle. Three nights later, he gets to do a stomach pump on a young woman who's overdosed. Which is pretty gross, but cool too.

He's cleaning her up and checking her signs when Leslie comes over to supervise. The woman - who's still stoned out of her mind, but is gonna be okay once she's detoxed - watches them both.

"Good work," Leslie says, nodding. "You're a quick study."

"Tell that to my teachers," Jason answers with a tired grin. Working at the clinic is even better than hanging out there.

"It'd be easier if you did some schoolwork, for a change, and let them see for themselves."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Got yourself a boy wonder of your own, Leslie?" the woman asks. Her voice is hoarse, hardly more than a croaky breath.

"That's not funny, Holly." Leslie sounds annoyed.

"Sure it is, doc."

"I heard you were in San Francisco."

"Yeah, well, you know what they say about Gotham. Once you're hers, you'll never get away," the woman says, a cough becoming a dry retch against her hand.

One night, Jason gets held up talking to his mom, and doesn't get to the clinic until well after dinner. As is becoming increasingly usual, Leslie's door is shut. Jason's about to use his key when snatches of the conversation begin to make their way through the door.

"- failed you, by letting you create *this* out of yourself. Don't make me a failure twice!" Leslie says angrily, her voice raised. Then there's quiet for a couple of seconds, which Jason assumes is someone else replying. He strains to hear, but can't catch more than a murmur.

"It's not the same at all," Leslie snaps, in response to whatever the other speaker has pointed out. "I'm teaching him to heal. You'd teach him to hurt."

Jason all but presses his ear to the door, but all he manages to get is "- him to *protect*." Batman's voice.

Leslie's quiet for so long that Jason's about to open the door and make sure she's okay. Then, quietly, in a voice as tired as he ever hears her get, she says "Please, Bruce. Not this boy."

Jason sneaks away from the door.

Batman's car is parked in the same place as it was the last time Jason saw it, which is most likely just Jason's dumb luck. Batman's probably got a hundred different places to keep it near the clinic.

Jason digs around in his pocket until he finds a mostly-intact cigarette in his jacket and a lighter in his jeans. The first-level fire escape balcony is easy enough to climb up to. Jason sits down and lights up.

He knows that Leslie used to look after that Bruce Wayne guy a lot when he was a kid, after his parents got murdered. Is that who Batman is? Were they really talking about Jason, or is he imagining that?

There's a scuffling noise down near the car. Jason strains his eyes to get a better look, and can just make out the silhouette of someone near the darker end of the alley. It looks like it's a kid.

"Hey, who's there?" he calls, ready to make a run for it if he has to. A whole bunch of people would be lining up to tan his hide if he got himself into trouble in this part of town. Leslie and his mom are bad enough, and now it looks like Batman's got an interest in his welfare, too.

"Nobody. Just me," the kid says.

"Come over here so I can see you, then."

He's small and nervous looking. Doesn't look like the Crime Alley type, but that doesn't really mean much. All kinds of people end up in the clinic, after all.

"Climb up," Jason offers. Even if the kid's thinking of trying something, Jason'll be able to take him down easy. "Cigarette?"

"No. Thanks." The boy climbs the ladder and sits down beside Jason.

"Good thing. I'm not sure if I have any left. I'm Jason."

"Tim."

"I guess, with the two of us getting an eyeful, 'Batman's car' just became a spectator sport."

"The Batmobile."

"What?"

"The Batmobile," Tim repeats. "That's what it's called."

"Oh. Okay." Jason takes another drag on his cigarette. "I didn't know that." Then he laughs. "Maybe *you* should be the new Robin."

"Ow! Damn it, don't -"

"Sissy," Tim says, smiling, and dabs more antiseptic on the cut on Jason's cheekbone.

"It's gonna swell up and bruise. I can tell."

Tim nods. "I think you're right. But, beyond being sore tomorrow, I think you're fine."

"I'm sore *now*," Jason complains. "I can't believe I was so stupid."

"I can."

"Oh, fuck you." Jason pulls his faded flannel overshirt back on. It's a little small for him, but he doesn't want to throw it out. It's taken years to get it this soft and perfectly worn down.

"Sorry. I'll wait until you're feeling better before I mock your pain," Tim promises, and packs up the medical kit. They're sitting side-by-side on the floor of the supplies room at the clinic. It's two in the morning, and they've just got back from breaking up a brawl.

Well, Tim broke up a brawl. Jason got a couple of solid hits in, and then got his ass handed to him.

"Stop beating yourself up -"

"If you make some crack about how those skels can do it for me, you're going to be fighting crime from traction, I swear to -"

"- they were pretty top-level guys, Jay. You're not trained for that sort of combat."

Jason shrugs, and looks down at his crossed legs. Tim's in uniform but his mask and one of his gloves are off, and Jason always feels uncomfortable when he has to look at Tim like that. Which is stupid, because he's seen Tim out of costume an uncountable number of times.

"Spoiler's not trained either, and I don't see her with road rash down one arm. How is she, anyway? Feels like it's been ages since she's come to hang."

"Didn't you hear?" Tim asks. Jason shakes his head, heart suddenly in his throat. Nothing but really bad news ever starts with 'didn't you hear'. "She's pregnant."

"Fuck," Jason says.

"I don't think she's too bad, considering," Tim replies, reaching across Jason and grabbing ahold of his arm, turning it to get a look at the road rash. "Ever noticed how there're some people who are always basically okay, no matter what? Steph's one of those. She's embarrassed that it's happened, but she's got the adoption all lined up already. She'll be fine."

Jason thinks of his mom. Some people are always basically okay, and some never are. It's just one of those things.

Tim's inspecting the grazes on Jason's arm, bare hand on Jason's wrist. "If I showed up with an injury like this, what would you do?"

"Come on, that antiseptic stings like a bitch. It'll be fine. There's no gravel in it," Jason complains. He's going to pull his arm free of Tim's grip any second now. And, for his next trick, he'll get his breathing back to normal, and stop looking at Tim's mouth.

"But if it were me, you'd make me dress it. Admit it," Tim teases. "Tough Guy Jason Todd hates iodine."

"We're not all trained in freaky hot-coal meditation, y'know," Jason manages to retort, just before Tim kisses him.

Jason jolts a little, knocking his head against the shelf behind him. Tim breaks away and looks at the floor.

"Sorry. I mean. I was just. Sor -" he starts to stammer, so Jason turns his head and restarts the kiss. The skin at the outer corner of Tim's eye is soft and warm, a little damp from a night under the mask, and Jason strokes it with his thumb.

Tim's own hand tightens on Jason's wrist, and it's only then that Jason notices that Tim didn't let go of it. Tim's hands are strong, purposeful, wonderful things, and when Jason slips his tongue between Tim's lips the fingers holding his arm spasm slightly. There's a tremble in Tim's skin.

So Jason angles his head a bit better, and decides that he'll be perfectly happy to stay kissing forever. He can tell Tim's eyes are closed, because Jason can feel the brush of lashes against his cheek.

He wants to say something dumb and funny, to make Tim laugh. Jason likes it when he makes Tim laugh. But that would mean using his mouth for something other than sucking on Tim's lip, and remembering how to talk, and he's not really interested in either of those things.

Tim moves his other hand, still in its gauntlet, to Jason's thigh. It feels heavier than Tim's hand, and colder. Not a part of Tim at all. It's a part of Robin, and Jason's sort of kissing Tim and Robin both at once, or maybe somebody halfway between the two. He can't understand why someone like that, someone so freaky and smart and strong and sneaky, would want to hang out with a regular guy like Jason.

But it seems to work for Tim. His hand on Jason's arm has crept up to where he pushed the cuff of the overshirt up, to look at the road rash. Jason stops kissing Tim for long enough to shrug the shirt off entirely. He wants every molecule of skin he has to be bare, if it'll mean that Tim will keep touching him. Or, even better...

"Show me how to take your suit off," Jason says breathlessly, stroking Tim's neck just above the collar of his cape. It seems suddenly reckless that he doesn't know the trick of this already - what if Tim came to the clinic badly hurt, and Jason didn't know how to strip him? Why hasn't he ever thought of this before?

Oh, right. Because he got all tongue-tied when he saw so much as Tim's hand.

Tim nods, and moves his hand off Jason's arm. Tugs on a hidden catch on the collar, and the cape falls free.

Jason makes a choked noise, and bites kisses along the line of Tim's chin and down onto his neck. There's no way he can handle Tim being more naked than he presently is. Just a few inches of extra skin has pretty much killed any higher thoughts Jason has beyond 'touch now'.

One of his hands, which was battling against the gel in Tim's hair, moves to rest against the back of that newly-bared neck, and the other is somewhere around the small of Tim's back. Tim's spine is curving so that he's pressing against both of Jason's hands and leaning in to the path of Jason's mouth as well, and Jason doesn't think it's fair that Tim can be so swathed in armor and still bend that much.

Tim pulls his remaining glove off with his teeth, sliding both his now-bare hands down Jason's sides to the hem of his t-shirt.

"Jay," Tim says, sounding uncertain. Tim never sounds uncertain about anything, unless he's playing at it for a reason. He hasn't sounded like that since the earliest times Jason met him. "Can I touch you? Is that okay?"

"Touching me now," Jason murmurs against Tim's throat. And Tim is, both hands against Jason's back now.

"No, I mean -" Tim moves one of his hands around, tracing the waistband of Jason's pants to the fly.

The only thing Jason remembers how to say is "Tim", which isn't exactly an answer but seems close enough. He moves away from Tim's neck and back up to his mouth, surprised that he could forget how perfect Tim's tongue feels against his just in the couple of minutes since they last did this.

Somewhere out in the clinic, the metallic clatter of a knocked-over suture tray slices through all the other sounds. Jason's glad he put a bolt on the inside of the door to this room, as well as the standard lock-from-the-outside handle. It would be hard to explain the current situation to some poor volunteer nurse looking for extra bandages.

Tim pulls the zipper down and slips his hand inside, and the only reason Jason doesn't end up breaking the kiss due to sensory overload is because Tim's very good at tracking another person's movements with his own.

Tim's hand. Tim's hard, precise, weaponlike hand, finding a rhythm which makes Jason gasp against Tim's mouth and scrabble his own hands against Tim's thighs.

The soreness which was making him feel stiff and exhausted before is like a blunt ache all over Jason's body now, shot through with warmth in the places Tim has touched him. "Wanna keep doing this forever," he mutters. Which is a lie, because pretty soon he's gonna need to come or risk losing his mind permanently, but it's the truth as well.

Tim's making more noise than Jason now, quiet groans which take on a higher pitch when Jason decides to test how hard he has to rub before Tim can feel it through his armor.

"Only because -" Tim gasps out, interrupting himself with a cry that almost sounds like pain. "You don't want to go home."

"Like you can talk," Jason answers. If he had any air spare, he might even laugh a little at that. Some people are basically okay, and some aren't, and

Jason's not sure which of those types he and Tim are.

"We're so fucked up," offers Tim by way of agreement. It always gives Jason a thrill when Tim's reduced to swearing.

"Hey, it got us here." Which makes everything worthwhile. Even the way Jason knows that the fact he hangs out here is the only reason that Two Face's local protection racket never bothers the clinic. Even the way his mom's always got something snide to say when Jason mentions that he wants to do emergency nursing after he's through with high school. Even the way he picks fights between classes and they never feel like enough of whatever it is that he's chasing.

"Jay," Tim breathes between clenched teeth, shuddering hard as he comes. The movement of his hand on Jason doesn't even falter, and it's that as much as it is the touch which makes Jason press his forehead against Tim's shoulder and bite his lip to keep in a shout.

Tim's other hand comes up and presses against the graze on Jason's arm, palm damp with sweat and fingers squeezing in time with Jason's panting breaths.

"Tim, I'm gonna," Jason huffs, burying his face against the crook of Tim's neck when he comes. Tim makes the same small satisfied hum as he does when he tracks down a piece of key evidence, and lets Jason lie boneless against him for a few minutes.

"This uniform's going to become incredibly gross to be in really soon," he says eventually. "In case you were wondering."

Jason snorts. "You can be Gross, and I'll be Sore. Dynamic duo for the new millennium."

"Villains of Gotham quake in fear."

"Villains of the *world*, Robin. Don't sell us short."

Tim laughs a little, and covers Jason's hand with his own.

KIDS LIKE US

Mrs Penderley hands Steph a pamphlet, then presses a cotton bud covered in antiseptic onto the scrape below Steph's right eye.

Steph hisses at the pain, then sneers at the pamphlet.

"I don't need to go to Kids Of Jailbirds Anonymous," she protests, trying to wriggle away from the sting.

"Stay *still*," the nurse answers, clamping one hand onto Steph's shoulder. "This is the third time this term you've been in here after getting in a fight. This group offers free counseling, tutors, and after-school programs. There's even a summer camp."

"I'll feel like a freak."

"No you won't. Everyone there is in the same boat. Some of them are the children of people in prison, some are street kids, and some just have problems fitting in. It looks like it'll be a lot of fun. Make some new friends, learn some new skills."

"You're not going to lay off until I say yes, are you?"

"Damn straight. Stephanie, these cuts and bruises are terrible. What on earth -"

"Okay, okay, I'll go to the stupid program."

Futures Without Borders is sponsored by an incredibly hot rich guy in a suit who smiles a lot and introduces himself as Bruce. Steph instantly decides she has a huge crush on him, and then distracts herself from it by ignoring the much-too-perky coordinators who want them all to sign up for art classes and rowing lessons. Steph picks softball, gymnastics, and soccer. The community centre smells like paint and spray-on deodorant. There's a poster on the wall telling Steph to say no to drugs.

It's nice to have somewhere to go after school the next day. The soccer field's patchy and brown, but they get free baseball caps and drink bottles so they don't get overheated. There's a local electricity company advertised on Steph's set, and the colour clashes with her faded t-shirt.

"Hey. That's one fucked-up bruise you've got."

He's older than her, and has a mark even worse than hers on his cheek.

"We match," Steph says, gesturing to it. "How'd you get yours?"

"Some jerk was ripping off a liquor store. I got butt-stroked by his gun... That's what it's *called* when they do that," he protests when Steph sniggers. "What about you?"

"A bitch in my class cheated off my chemistry paper, then called me a retard when we both failed."

"Hope she came out of it worse than you did."

Steph grins. "You'd better believe it. I'm Steph."

"Jay. You ever play soccer before?"

"Nah."

"It's cool. You'll like it. It's kinda like hackey sack, you just gotta know how to control your feet."

"You're from Crime Alley, right? Everyone I know who still plays hackey sack is from there."

The look he gives her is appreciative, and not in the way Steph's used to seeing on guys. "Yeah. Once upon a time."

"The foster home shuffle, huh?"

"Something like that. C'mon, let's play." He beckons for her to follow.

Softball's pretty okay, and gymnastics is almost as fun as soccer. The locker rooms are nicer than the ones at Steph's school, and the hot water doesn't run out like it usually does at home.

"Can I borrow your conditioner? I have to work tonight and I'm all knotty."

Steph hands the bottle over to the girl under the next shower head. "Sure."

"Thanks. I'm Mia."

She's about Steph's age and height, but about fifteen pounds thinner.

"Steph."

"Hi. You're the first person I've met in this town who hasn't asked if I wanna get high with them."

"I don't do that stuff."

Mia gives a quiet laugh. "Wish I could say the same."

Steph takes the conditioner bottle back and starts working on her own hair. "Where're you from?"

"Around. I'm taking a breather in Gotham until stuff quietens down back home. A doctor at the clinic I went to yesterday told me to come check this program out. I'm doing gym and archery."

"Cool."

Mia starts singing to herself as she washes. It's 'Fast Car', by Tracy Chapman. Steph joins in, and Mia smiles at her.

"I love that song."

"Me too. That CD gets me through tons of homework nights."

"I haven't heard her other stuff."

"I'll give it to you, if you like," offers Steph. "My player's crapped out anyway, so it's not like I can get use out of it right now. And it's just a burned one. I can get another easy."

"If you wanna make some money fast, you can come with me tonight. You'll have enough for a new player in a couple of hours."

"Um." Steph shakes her head, sending water droplets every which way. She turns the taps off and begins to towel herself. "Thanks, but no thanks, you know? I don't think..."

"Hey, you don't have to give a reason. Tricking sucks. I just thought you might want some cash fast."

"Not that much." Steph smiles, hoping she hasn't wrecked a chance at making a new friend. Why can't she bow to peer pressure like normal people?

"Do you feel like a walk, at least? I wouldn't mind the company, until the jobs start showing up. Gotham's not much like anywhere I've ever been before."

Mia's dress is tiny and tight, and the dark sheen makes her look even thinner than she is. Steph feels childish and awkward beside her, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, but finds herself thinking comfortably

of her bedroom and her dumb celebrity posters on its walls waiting for her back home.

Gotham's oddly bipolar in the evenings. The day people and the night people don't know how to mingle with each other on the sidewalks. Steph's not sure which category she wants to feel like she fits in with.

"Heya, Holly," Mia says to a young woman sitting on a long-defunct bus stop bench. "This is Steph."

"Hi," Steph says with a little wave, feeling even younger. She's always been the tough girl, the one who's not afraid of a fight, the one the guards at Blackgate know by name. But next to these two, she might as well be a Catholic schoolgirl.

"See, I told you you'd make friends," Holly says to Mia, elbowing her in the ribs. "Gotham's not all scary freaks."

"Famous last words," Mia replies, pointing up at the skyline. "Look."

A dark shape leaps across a wide gap between two buildings, followed a few seconds later by two more.

"Catwoman. And Batman and Robin," Steph says, awed. "I wonder what she stole this time?"

"That would be the coolest life in the world." Mia's words are muffled as she pops two no-doze pills into her mouth and swallows without water. "Can you imagine?"

Steph thinks of her dad, and grimaces. "They're just people. Anyone could do it."

On Friday night she goes to a movie with Jay. The theatre's just down the road from the kebab

place where Steph worked in the summer after eighth grade.

"We *have* to hang out around here more often," Jay says when they're walking down the main strip after the movie. Steph's still thinking about the storyline, aliens and spaceships and explosions and stuff. When she was a kid, she'd thought that was exciting. Now it just makes her feel sad for how drab the real world can be.

"It's just a suburb," she replies, confused.

"Nah. You think that, until you go somewhere else. Gotham Heights and the East End, they're full of *people*. I bet I can find ten things from right here that I'd never find over where I'm staying. Let's see... okay, for starters, that kebab place you said you worked at. Pita bread doesn't taste right unless it's wrapped up in paper and bursting with cheap tahini, I'm telling you." He nods at passing pedestrians. "Woman in a headscarf. Guy drinking a Sol beer. Black kid busking. Two guys in wifebeaters. Obvious welfare mom."

"Someone's going to *hear*," Steph hisses, shoving him along the street. She can feel her cheeks burning. "I have to *live* around here."

"Whereas over the other side of town, all you get is skinny blondes and guys with manicures."

Safely surrounded by lighted houses, with the shopping district behind them, Steph slows her pace. "And yet you took a skinny blonde out for a date."

"You're not skinny. I don't like skinny people. It's like screwing a sack of elbows."

Steph makes a choked noise of protest. "There are so many things about what you just said that I need to punch you for."

Jay beams at her. "Cool. Kinky's fine with me. I knew there was a reason guys went for younger women."

"You're only a year older than me!"

He breathes on his fingernails and buffs them against the collar of his jacket. "You only have to call me daddy if it turns you on, babe."

"*Gross!*" Steph shoves him off the sidewalk, laughing.

"I guess asking you to dress up like a naughty intern's out, then?"

Steph hasn't had sex with that many people -- she's still not quite fifteen yet, after all, and she's not boy-crazy like some of the girls at school -- but Jay's probably the best she's had so far. His hands are warm and heavy when they touch her, and he doesn't paw like most guys do.

"You're good at this," she tells him after, when they're lying on her bed. She can see the stars through her window. They're muted by the smog.

"I had a good teacher," he answers, which Steph would have figured out if she'd thought about it.

"I'm not your first? I'm shocked." Smiling, she adjusts herself against his side and traces a hand up his chest. "These are really bullet scars?"

"Yep. A thirty-eight. Four entries, three exits." He taps his finger against one of the marks.

"So you've still got one in you?"

"No, dork. The doctor took it out."

"Did you get to keep it?"

"Didn't think to ask."

"Hmm." Steph settles back against her pillow again. "One of my Dad's friends kept one they took

out of him. I always thought that was pretty cool, I guess. Proving you'd survived something like that."

"I've got all the proof I need here. Is your Dad around much?"

Steph scowls at her ceiling and doesn't look at Jay. "If Blackgate counts as around, yeah."

"Has he been there long?"

"Most of my life, in and out."

"Heh. We might've seen each other in the visitor's area and never known it. My Pop was there a lot too, before he died."

"Really?" For some reason, that makes Steph smile.

"We've got.. what's that line in *Lolita*? Strange affinities."

"Isn't that a dirty book?"

Jay shrugs, as much as he can lying on his back. "Sort of. I had to read it for English."

"Seems like a weird book to read for class."

"It's like I said earlier. Different bits of Gotham are different worlds. Hey, you got any cigarettes?"

Steph shakes her head and sits up, glancing around for her shirt. "My Mom might. I heard her get home before. Wanna meet her?"

"Sure. But Moms mostly don't like me."

Steph snorts. "Believe me, you're a prince compared to the guys who end up in her life. She, uh. She might be a little out of it, you know? Just so you don't think she's a space cadet or something. She, um. You know."

Jay nods, and squeezes her hand. "I get it."

Mia's not at their next gymnastics class, or the next two after that. Steph misses her, but she's used to that happening. She's had friends like Mia before.

Sometimes, when she's feeling hurt and catty, she thinks that Jay counts as a reality upgrade for her. He's got his problems, but he doesn't show any sign of blowing town without warning.

He's been in a shitty mood, though. Two pretty violent fights with some of the guys on the boys' soccer team; brooding silences; all the stupid crap Steph gets enough of from her own head.

Finally, she's had enough of it.

"You ever do drama at school?"

Jay looks up, from yet another of his 'scowl at the ground on the soccer field' performances. "What? Oh. No."

"I did. Last year. We did this play about these Greek women. In the olden times, y'know, when they all wore togas and stuff. They were pissed off at their husbands, and they said 'that's it, no more sex for you'." Steph folds her arms across her chest. "So if you want to keep making evening visits twice a week after practice, you'd better stop acting like a jerk and tell me what the hell's up."

"It's heavy stuff. You don't wanna know."

"I asked, didn't I? Jay, I'm *worried* about you. And you're about the only person I feel close to right now. Don't shove me away just because you're a boy and boys are idiots."

He laughs a little, and rests his arm around her waist. "I'll come by your house later and tell you about it."

"Wanna stay for dinner? Mom's not going to be around, but we could get pizza and watch horror movies or something."

"I'm on kind of a short leash at home right now." The way he says it, Steph can tell that she'll hear the full story later.

"Okay. Just talking, then. Maybe some other stuff, if I feel you've earned it."

Jay moves his hand down, resting it against her thin cotton shorts. "You drive a hard bargain, Miss Brown."

"I'm a tyrant like that," she agrees, leaning into the touch.

On their way home, Steph stops to pick up some milk at the corner store. She didn't drink much of it when she was a kid -- food was mostly greasy or sugary -- and sometimes she worries that when she grows up her bones are going to be weak. She tries to have a glass every day, when she can afford it.

"Steph!"

Mia's working behind the counter, the bright orange of her checkout uniform making her look even greyer and more limp than she would anyway. Her expression is happy, but she looks like crap.

"Mia! Where've you been? Are you okay? I figured you'd gone back to Star City."

"You're not gonna believe it. I was with this john, and he was getting rough, and *Catwoman* saves my ass. She talked to some friends of hers and got me this job, and set me up with a place to stay while all the crap I was taking to stay alert got out of my system. I'm staying at this fleabag place downtown. Total rat trap, but it's better than the shithole brothel I was paying in trade."

"I missed you. You could've called."

Mia looks sheepish. "I know. But I know how you feel about costumed criminals and all, and I thought you'd be against letting someone like that offer me help."

"Still." Steph feels angry for a moment, then gives it up. "I'm glad you're okay. We should hang out. Come by my place around eight? We'll get pizza and rent a bunch of cartoons from the video store."

"It's a date."

"No, I've got that earlier. That's why you're not coming around at seven." Steph winks.

"You'll have to give me all the gossip when I come around."

"Bet on it. I've left him waiting outside, so I gotta run."

Jay's smoking -- he claims he's given up, but for a guy who's given up he sure does it often -- when Steph gets back outside. His fingers tremble a little on the cigarette, and Steph feels disappointed in herself for not realising how lousy he's obviously feeling. She's never had the best role models in the world for good relationships, but she still hates it when she gets stuff wrong.

When they get back to her place, she drinks her glass of milk and then they climb out to sit on the roof above her window.

"Okay, here we are. Talk away."

"It's..." Jason taps the side of his thumb against his lips. "A bunch of really heavy shit. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Stop putting it off and just tell me, Jay. If I couldn't handle heavy stuff, I wouldn't have survived this long in my sewer of a life, okay?"

"I killed a guy. Let him die, anyway."

"What happened?" Steph asks, feeling her eyes go wide. So much for a reality upgrade.

"He was abusing his girlfriend. Raping her, beating her. He was gonna walk on it because of some bullshit loophole. I went around to his apartment to give him a taste of his own medicine, you know? Knock the stuffing out of him. But he saw me coming, and..." Jay draws a deep breath. "And fell back over the rail of his balcony. I could've... I know I coulda caught him if it'd been someone I'd wanted to save. He lived real high up. Didn't survive." Jay scrubs his hand across his eyes, his long eyelashes in dark star-points from damp.

Steph sits and thinks about what he's told her for a few seconds, then nods slowly. "I don't think what you did was wrong. Some people are just... fuckers. I sometimes think about pushing my dad off something high."

"Believe me, you'd regret it later," Jason tells her with a wry, snuffling laugh, rubbing his eyes again. "And then, a couple of days later, a... a friend of mine got hurt. Bad. The Joker shot her in the fucking *spine*. I feel like it's my fault, because I let that guy fall. Like the universe is punishing her for what I did."

"The universe doesn't work like that." Steph tries not to think about the people who end up hurt from the city's costumed criminals. Mia was understating the situation when she'd said Steph didn't like that scene.

If she starts thinking about the victims, she's never going to be able to look her father in the face again.

"It still feels like it."

"I'm sorry about your friend, Jay. But it's not your fault. What you did was... well, it wasn't *good*. But, well, if he was gonna walk, that means that bad stuff goes unpunished, right? So why should you get a rap when he didn't, since what he did was worse than what you did?"

He links his hand with hers. The palm's wet and warm. She squeezes his fingers. "I guess."

They sit there until the sky starts to darken. In a weird way, it feels more intimate than sex.

When Mia arrives, Steph and Jay have come back indoors and are flicking through the grainy reception on the television in the front room.

"Mia, this is Jay. Jay, this is Mia."

If it was possible for Mia to get any paler than her current washed-out complexion, she does just that. After a beat she smiles. "Hey."

Jay nods in greeting, and hands the remote to Steph. "There's nothing on."

"Told you. That's why I rent stuff."

"Steph, can I talk to you for a sec?" Mia asks, just as there's a knock on the door behind her. She steps out of the way so Steph can answer it, still looking surprised by something.

It's the gorgeous millionaire guy who's paying for the after-school programs. He gives Steph a bright smile and says "Hi. I think you've got something of mine."

Jay stands up, swearing under his breath. "I forgot the museum dedication this evening, didn't I?"

"If you'd forgotten it, you wouldn't have remembered it just then!" Bruce says with a laugh. That's his name. Bruce. Steph remembered it because it wasn't a name she'd heard that often. "Alfred's brought your clothes. You can change when we get to the venue."

"Gotta run, Steph." Jay gives her a quick kiss. "I'll have to meet you properly next time, Mia. I'm sorry, Bruce, I totally --"

As the two of them walk across Steph's front lawn to their waiting car, Bruce rests his hand on the junction where Jay's shoulder curves up, just above the collar of his t-shirt. Bruce rubs at the nape of Jay's neck with the three middle fingers of his hand, a light back-and-forth motion. There's something about the small touch which makes Steph's own fingertips tingle.

"Steph, that was *Jason Todd*," Mia says as the car drives away.

"I know my own boyfriend's name, Mia. So?"

"He's the adopted son of *Bruce Wayne*. He's worth millions and millions of dollars."

"Since when do you keep up with that socialite crap?"

Mia rolls her eyes. "Everyone knows who Jason Todd is. Everyone but you, apparently."

"He's just a kid. Like me. Like us," Steph answers, flopping back down onto the couch. "Stop talking about it. I don't care."

"No need to get pissy about it. I was just surprised," Mia retorts. "So... is he good?"

Steph smiles. "He could win prizes. Backstroke and freestyle."

Laughing, Mia sits down beside her. "Has he ever said if it's true about Bruce Wayne?"

"Mia, until five minutes ago I didn't even know that he *knew* Bruce Wayne. If *what's* true, anyway?"

"You know." Mia makes an indecipherable gesture. "Bruce Wayne, teenage boys. There's some other orphan kid he looked after out there, too. Grown up, now. Jason ever say if Daddy comes to give him a goodnight kiss?"

The look Steph gives Mia is disgusted. "Don't joke about stuff like that. It's not funny."

"It' isn't exactly the same thing, Steph. You're apparently the only teenage girl in the state who doesn't spend her nights fantasizing about being the meat in that sandwich. I bet Jason's never made you think of a little kid getting molested by some shitbag loser, right?" A waver creeps into Mia's voice on the last words, the tremor destroying her joking tone.

"Mia?"

"I'm... It's... One of the people I met through Catwoman told me how to start proceedings to get emancipated from my parents. It's making me think about stuff I'd tried to forget."

"Oh. *Oh*. Sorry."

"Don't -" Mia starts to say, then sighs. "Thanks."

"I had a, y'know, 'uncle' like that. He's, um. Dead now."

Mia presses her lips together, obviously trying not to smile. "I guess there's something to be said for having a supervillain in the family."

After a day of hearing deep, meaningful revelations from her friends, Steph doesn't want anything nearly so much as she wants to fall into bed and sleep as deeply as she can for as long as possible.

Her digital clock reads 2:17 when her window slides up and Jay climbs in.

Steph sits up in bed, blinking dazedly and knowing for sure that her hair looks like a bird's nest.

"What the hell? Jay, what -"

"I have a *mother*. Somewhere. I'd never seen my birth certificate, but this after the museum party I was walking through my old neighbourhood and I met this lady we used to know and she had it and she showed it to me and -"

"Speak slower. Some of us just woke up." Steph scoots up to the end of the bed to give him room to sit. "I thought your mom died? An OD?"

"I thought so too." Jay's eyes look bright like fever. "But I was adopted. My dad was really my dad, but my mother's someone else. Someone out there. I'll have to find out. Track her down. I still have a parent, Steph!"

"Jay, I know stuff's been really tough for you lately, but maybe you should..."

"What? What's wrong? You look like you think I'm crazy."

"Of course I don't think you're crazy. I just... I think that someone would have to have a really good reason to give their baby up, you know? It's not exactly like deciding what kind of haircut to get or something."

Jay's jaw tenses and he looks away from her. "You're right," he says flatly, sounding like he believes nothing of the sort.

"Don't be like that."

"No, it's fine." He stands up. "I gotta go, anyway. Night."

"Jason, don't just -" Steph starts to say, but he's back out the window and vanished from view. By the time she follows, he's nowhere to be seen.

Sighing in frustration, she flops back onto her bedspread, staring up at the ceiling. Already, Steph can tell that she's not getting back to sleep anytime soon.

She pulls on a pair of jeans and her sneakers, deciding that she might as well enjoy the night air if rest's out of the question.

And if she stays at home, some other absurd melodrama might present itself. As if she hasn't had enough for twenty-four hours yet.

Gotham at night is scary, but it's also beautiful. Romantic. Architecture from every era and style crowds together, speckled with lights and covered in grime. Everything is sharp and dirty and real.

Steph's walked through the city often enough to know the right way to look and stride so as to avoid most of the trouble around. She has a knife in one sock, like her dad taught her to carry. It's one of the few pieces of practical advice she can remember getting from him.

She goes into the Belly Burger on the corner of Daniel and Kidd and orders a small fries, just so she's got an excuse to stay in the brightness of the plastic booths for a while. A boy a little younger

than her is nursing a kid-sized soda, obviously for the same reason. He gives her a long look, like he's slightly surprised to see her. There's a camera strap around his neck, but Steph can't see the camera itself because of the chipped plastic tabletop.

People come in, people go out. She watches them, having nothing much else to do. She's good at watching people, especially the night-people in Gotham. Her father is one of these people. It's her blood.

A little before four, a man in a suit comes in sporting a rapidly swelling black eye.

"Robin just saved me from being mugged!" the man breathlessly tells the scrappy assortment of homeless people and bored teenagers sitting in the mostly deserted dining area. Steph notices the boy with the camera look up from his tabletop.

"Where?" he asks, standing.

"Just down the block. Near Nichol road. He was putting the fear of God into the little punk when I left."

Steph snorts. Everyone with a brain knows Nichol road is a thug hangout, and only someone with a death-wish would go there at this hour.

She'd love to get a look at Robin, though. That'd give her one-up on Mia, because superheroes are *way* cooler than villains. Even a pretty cool villain like Catwoman. And Steph's heard stories about Robin. How he'll flirt with girls, and maybe even steal a kiss or two. That would make a great story to boast about later.

The boy reaches the door at the same time she does, and this time the look he gives her isn't surprised at all. He heads in the opposite direction to

her, up toward the hill and the train station with the lookout tower on the roof. For city views, there isn't anywhere much better for about ten blocks in any direction. Steph smiles. If she wanted a snapshot of Gotham's vigilantes, it'd be a smart place to go for a clear look. Whoever the kid is, he's clever.

Throwing caution into the wind, Steph walks past the well-lit strip of late-night fast food places and into the dimmer parts of the city. Dawn's not even a promise yet, and the shadows loom from all sides. This facet of Gotham has a beauty to it, as well. It makes her think of big cats on nature documentaries. The grace of the predator.

"Not so tough now, are you?" someone says viciously, the words followed by a thud and a pained grunt. Steph gasps a little, biting back a breath, and peeks around a corner.

Robin is kicking a big, burly guy in a leather vest in the stomach. What Steph can see of Robin's face is contorted in a look of violent satisfaction. There're splatters of blood on the wall of the narrow street. With another kick, Robin tilts his head back and laughs.

Steph suddenly understands why the expression is 'falling' in love. Her stomach feels like it just dropped three stories. She swallows, pressing herself further into the shadows, and watches. Robin is tying the man's hands behind his back with some kind of narrow tape. He's humming to himself as he works, and jabs his elbow into any soft places he might come into reach of.

A huge, dark shape, like a dragon or maybe a devil, sweeps down and lands near Robin.

"Something's wrong with you," Batman says.

"Nothing's wrong," Robin snaps in reply before starting up his cheerful hum again. "Let me do my job."

"You've been distracted all night."

"I didn't screw up, did I? I know you've been watching me."

"Only because I'm worried." Batman's voice is scary, and Steph has to stop herself from shivering. Robin doesn't seem the least bit afraid, but that's not surprising really.

As Robin straightens up from his crouch, Batman rests one dark hand on the back of his neck, rubbing back and forth with the middle three fingers. Robin seems soothed by the touch, and slouches. When he speaks, he sounds exhausted.

"C'mon, let's go back to the car."

Steph remains frozen to the spot long after they've shot their ropes off and swung away. It's very late -- early, even -- and she knows she should go somewhere safer. But the touch plays over and over in her head, the twin of another gesture she saw less than twelve hours ago on her front path.

It's kind of funny, in a way. She's just fallen in love with the guy she's been sleeping with.

Waking up in the middle of the night and then not going back to sleep before school has totally screwed up Steph's body clock, not to mention her grades. For the next three days she crashes straight after getting home from gymnastics or soccer or whatever, and then wakes up way before sunrise. It's not so bad. It gives her time to be alone in the quiet. Being locked in a closet, sometimes for days at a

time, taught Steph to enjoy her own company pretty early on.

One night, she goes downstairs to find her mother asleep on the sofa with an empty bottle of red wine nearby. Steph pulls the old knitted blanket they keep down here over her, and goes over to her mom's purse. Sometimes Steph likes to put a twenty or two aside, in case they need groceries or toilet paper or something.

There's an envelope wadded up in the coin section, the side torn open but the letter jammed back inside. Steph recognises her father's handwriting instantly, and skims the short paragraphs.

He's cracked the problem, he tells her mom. Letting the police know what he's doing before he does it, because of this compulsion to share clues. But if he tells *her*, Crystal Brown, what he's planning, then he'll have taken care of the feeling and will be free to steal the antique ruby necklaces on display at the Gotham Silversmiths' Historical Society.

Steph folds the letter up again calmly, and slips it back where she finds it. Forgetting to take any money out, she puts the purse back and climbs the stairs to her room.

She wants to tell Jay, or Mia. She wants to slap her dad around, or maybe her mom. She wants to have someone to confide in the way her friends confided in her, but knows she can't go to them with something like this. Especially not Jay, not now that she knows he's Robin.

No, this is her knowledge alone.

The sun takes a long time to come up.

Jay finds her at lunch the next day. He climbs over the fence into her school's grounds, picking his way through the litter and cigarette butts to where she usually sits under a straggly tree with limp leaves.

"Have you forgiven me yet?" Steph asks, brushing the hair out of her eyes. Jay looks contrite.

"Yeah. I was just messed up."

"Wow, that was almost an apology. Careful," she teases.

"Yeah, yeah. Blow off afternoon classes with me? I need to go see a friend of mine, and I haven't seen her without someone else there since she got hurt, and I'd like it if it wasn't just the two of us."

"This is your friend who got shot by the Joker?" Steph asks quietly, looking away when Jay nods. "I don't know. She might not want to see someone she doesn't know."

"C'mon. Please?"

She's got chemistry this afternoon. Melissa might be pitching a fit over failing another test by cheating off Steph.

"Okay. But you *owe* me, Jason Peter Todd."

Kissing her forehead, Jay grins. "Got it. C'mon."

They catch the bus, and Steph ignores the dirty looks the housewives out on errands given them. Like they're the first kids ever to skip school.

The hospital smells like hospitals always do. It's a private one, so it's not much like the ones Steph's been in before, but the smell is the same. Jay grasps her hand tightly. He's sweating a little, despite the blast of air conditioning cooling the hallways and wards around them.

Barbara Gordon is in one of the rehabilitation wings of the complex, lying on her back with oddly-shaped things hidden under the blanket covering her body. She's scowling at a paperback novel like it's insulted her. Her reading glasses make her look older than she is; when she takes them off to greet Jay she looks young and tired.

"Hi, Barbara," Jay says, sitting in the closer visitor's chair. Steph sits in the other, feeling self-conscious.

"Bruce forced you to come visit?" asks Barbara, something a little like a smile in her voice. Steph can feel a sharp, hot rage building in her own legs, arms, and behind her eyes. This isn't *fair*. Nobody should be like this just because of a costumed nut.

"He threatened to take away my bike," Jay answers. A real, visible smile passes between them. Just as Steph's wondering if she should leave, Jay turns and gestures to her. "This is Stephanie, my girlfriend. She wanted to come."

Steph opens her mouth to protest, then snaps it shut. Barbara laughs, sounding like it hurts her.

"Don't. I had more corrective surgery three days ago. You'll make me pull something."

"I got something right here that you can p--"

Steph punches Jay on the arm, hard. Barbara chokes on another laugh.

"How you got any girl to go out with you more than once, kid, I'll never know," she says. A tear slips from the corner of one eye. "I'm sorry you got stuck with coming to visit me, Stephanie."

"*Someone* needs to keep a leash on this bozo," Steph answers, shooting a dagger-look at Jay. He scowls back at her, rubbing his arm.

"You're right about that," Barbara agrees. The words should be teasing, but they come out like a sigh.

Jay comes back to Steph's place after they're done at the hospital. They mess around twice and then he goes home. Steph paces for a while, liking to keep the smell of him on her skin until it's time to shower.

It's dark by the time she's washed her hair and collected everything she'll need for tomorrow's classes.

She can't stop thinking about Barbara Gordon. About how stupid and unfair the universe is. About how much damage gets done by freaks in costumes who want to make trouble.

There are black leggings and black leotards in Steph's drawers; gymnastics clothes she's worn often enough that they're starting to go shiny. She adds a pair of black boots and a black coat, and then digs around in the boxes on top of her wardrobe until she finds the black domino mask she wore to that fancy dress party in elementary school. The elastic at the back is decayed from age, but it's easy enough to thread some back ribbon through the eyelets and slip it onto her face.

Then it's out the window, and into Gotham.

She has no luck on that first night, so at school the next day she does some research.

The internet connections in the library are slow and the keyboards are sticky, but Steph promises herself that she can be grossed out and frustrated later and puts up with it. She searches for

'Catwoman' and gets what she's looking for right away: crackpot sites about UFO sightings and conspiracy theories, with a list of purported appearances by 'Gotham's Feline Fatale'. Steph makes gagging noises, then takes down the notes she needs. Then, since she has most of her lunch break left, she searches for 'Robin', 'Batman', 'Batman+Robin', 'Bat*', and everything else she can think of. There are a couple of blurry photographs from bad angles, and Steph feels sure that the kid she noticed the other night would have better snaps. She wonders if he's ever thought about selling them.

The page on 'Batgirl' hasn't been updated for a while. Sightings are described as 'infrequent to rare', whatever that means. The photo is better than the ones of Batman and Robin, and shows a woman with long red hair and a young-looking smile. She reminds Steph of someone, but Steph's not sure who.

Before she can print the picture out, the bell for the end of recess sounds loudly. Steph sighs, and disconnects.

The second night and her collection of notes provide Steph with better luck. Maybe Catwoman's so sure that she's safe in this part of town that she doesn't bother to hide.

"And who are you supposed to be?"

"Nobody," Steph answers, forcing herself to lean against a streetlight like she talks to master thieves every day. "But I've got information for you." She holds up the notebook that she's copied her dad's plan into. "There's a robbery going down in a week. Here's the where and the who. You can take the loot

right out of their hands, and leave them to take the fall."

Steph's not surprised when Catwoman looks wary. "Why?"

Shrugging's not easy to do while leaning against a pole. "You helped a friend of mine. I want to see these creeps locked up. I'm killing two birds with one stone."

"Why wear a mask?"

Snorting's easier than shrugging. "Why wear a *tail*? I didn't realise the city had a dress code."

Catwoman gives her a feral grin. "All right. I'll take your plans. If this is a setup, I'll get out of it anyway, and if it's not then you'll see whatever grudge it is you have fulfilled."

A crack of whip and a rush of air and Steph's alone again. She pushes a hand through her hair, breathes out heavily, and heads for home.

She sleeps better than she has all week.

The regional finals for under-sixteens archery remind Steph of the time she went with her friend Paula to the local cheerleading competition. There are pushy parents and scary-looking kids all over the place, sizing everyone up like they're the enemy.

Mia does okay in her category, coming second behind a girl with black eyebrows which meet in the middle. Third place goes to a tiny, skinny blonde girl with huge blue eyes and ridiculous target-shaped earrings.

"You threw that," Mia's saying to her as Steph approaches.

"Yep," the girl answers cheerfully. "I coulda beat you both with my eyes shut. I'm Suzy. Or Cissie. Whichever you like."

"Mia." They shake hands. "Why give up a cakewalk like that?"

"I wanted to piss my mother off. That's her fighting with the judges over there. Hi." Suzy turns to Steph.

"Hi. Mia, can we go yet? I'm scared someone's going to break our fingers."

"We're gonna get nachos. Wanna tag along?" Mia asks Suzy, who nods.

"Let's go before mom finds me. C'mon."

While they're waiting for their food to arrive, Mia and Suzy talk about archery stuff. Steph tries to pay attention, but their might as well be talking in Japanese for all she can follow.

The Mexican restaurant's about half-filled with people, all of them talking loudly. Steph lets her attention drift on the waves of noise for a minute before a familiar face pulls her up sharply.

The boy from the city is staring at her from across the room.

When he sees Steph notice him, he looks down and holds a menu above his face, as if a trick that lame could possibly hide him from recognition.

"Hey, Steph, you there?" Mia asks.

"Sorry, what?" Steph turns back to the others. "I wasn't paying attention."

When she looks over again, the boy's gone.

She dreams about shadows, and the sound of kicks against flesh, and Robin's laugh. Then the dream shifts and she dreams about long red hair,

and smiles, and the shape of a brace under hospital blankets.

When Steph wakes up, she wants to kick herself for being so stupid and not realising.

The weekend arrives, and Steph's mother gets drunk and falls asleep on the couch again. Steph settles into the armchair and puts the TV on the channel that has news updates every hour. She watches home shopping and late-night soap operas and some weird movie about French people having sex a lot. Then she starts drifting in and out of sleep, but by the time she realises that's what's happening she's too sleepy to care.

When she wakes up, the sky is beginning to lighten and there's a bulletin on.

"...the leader of the arrested group has been identified as the Cluemaster, who escaped from Blackgate prison earlier in the evening. His real name is unknown. Witnesses also report that Catwoman was seen in the area at the time of the robbery. Whether this is correct, and the location of the missing jewels, are not yet known."

Badly-framed footage shows her dad being driven away in a police car.

Steph jumps to her feet, punching the air silently and grinning so hard her face hurts.

She only goes to school because she knows there's no way she's sleeping, and there's nothing much else to do. All day, she feels like she's walking on air.

A tiny part of Steph feels like shit for turning on her own parent like that, but the rest of her is just glad it went off without a hitch.

After school, she skips soccer and goes home for a nap. When she wakes up again, she puts her tights and mask on and sneaks out her window. She's starting to see how easy it would be for something like this to become an addiction, especially for someone like her who has tendencies to that on both sides of her family. Still, it doesn't feel like the worst thing she could get hooked on.

Catwoman's waiting for her, in the same place as before.

"Your little plot earned me two hundred thousand dollars," Catwoman says. "Thanks."

Steph beams.

Catwoman keeps talking. "Come back to my place. I'll get changed and we'll hit the town."

There's no point in pretending to play that one cool. Steph gapes. "Really?"

"Really. I think I owe you a drink, at the very least."

"I'm not ol-" Steph starts to say, then bites her lip. Catwoman laughs, long and loud.

"I won't tell if you won't," she answers with a wink.

The bar they go to is a lot like the ones Steph's dad would sometimes take her to when her mom was too sick to look after her. Memories of sitting on the floor and playing with her doll while 'Daddy talked business' come back to Steph in waves so powerful that she feels another pang of guilt for playing him the way she did.

The feeling passes fast enough, and she looks around with new determination in her eyes. She fought crime, dammit. Well, kind of. And she's going to reward herself.

She's still dressed in the tights, boots, and leotard, but Catwoman -- Selina -- gave her a skirt to wear as well. The mask is tucked in the pocket of her jacket.

"Can I buy you a drink?" a guy who looks like bad news from head to foot asks her. Selina winks, leaning in close to Steph's ear.

"Enjoy yourself, kid. You've earned it."

Then she's gone in the crowd, green eyes bright with mirth and money, so Steph sets her jaw and puts a winning smile on. "Sure," she says to the guy.

"Hey, Benny, two!" he calls to the bartender, who nods.

"Okay, Matches. Gimme a second."

"Matches?" Steph asks over the din, quirking an eyebrow. "Your mother must've really hated you."

He gives her a leering smile. "Must be why I like fiery women."

God, he's as bad as Jay but without the charm. Still, there's something about him that makes Steph follow his lead to a less crowded corner of the room. Maybe it's the thrill of knowing that Catwoman will come to save her if she's in trouble.

No, it's not that. It's being pretty sure that she'd be able to save herself.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours," Matches says to her, raising his drink in a toast. She mirrors the gesture.

"Stephanie. Call me Steph."

"To new friends. Especially ones named Steph."

They click glasses, but Steph doesn't take a sip. A flash of colour at the corner of her vision has caught her eye.

Robin. Just outside one of the dingy windows, out the back amongst where the crates and trash cans must be stored.

She knows a normal person would feel guilty, getting caught like that, and she also knows she's not normal because all she feels is excited. Then Matches rests his hand on her shoulder, and the excitement turns to something thicker and warmer in her belly.

Steph's own fingertips tingle as the flat of Matches' three middle fingers brush against the back of her neck, back and forth.

It's not a signal, to her or to anyone else. She doubts he even realises he's doing it. Just a reflex action.

But now that she knows what to look for, his face shifts like it's coming into focus. The oily hair and the pock-marked cheeks and the moustache and the whiff of bad breath and the ugly suit all fade, and Steph can see Bruce Wayne hiding behind them.

A beat later, when she's absolutely certain that Robin's watching, Steph leans in and up and presses her mouth to Matches'. To Bruce's. To, oh *shit*, Batman's. She hears her throat make a high noise for a moment as his lips part and his hand presses more firmly against her neck, drawing her closer.

He's a really, really good kisser. If there was any way in the world Steph could possibly tell Mia about this, she would. *I might not have been the meat in the sandwich, but I've had both slices of the bread.*

Even as Steph enjoys a really nice make-out, she becomes certain of something much larger and more important. She's got somewhere else to be before the night is over, and that means she has to stop kissing Batman.

Any second now.

Climbing up the side of a hospital isn't the most fun Steph's ever had in her life, but it's not as difficult as she expected it to be. Not being able to eat enough most of the time has its advantages.

The window to Barbara Gordon's room is slightly ajar, and Steph manages to pry it open without making too much noise.

"I was wondering when you'd be back," Barbara says as Steph climbs inside.

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I don't sleep much. Turn the light on."

Steph does so, and blinks as her eyes adjust. "You expected me?" Now that she's here, she's lost for words.

"Of course."

"You know why I'm here?"

"Well, I'm guessing, based on the fact that you climbed in my window in the small hours of the night, and the fact that you're dating Jason, that you want my permission to put on a cape and a cowl and cause trouble. What makes you think I'd support something like that? Especially seeing where costumes and the battle between order and chaos got me."

"I think I'm going to be doing it even if you tell me you don't want me to, Ms Gordon," Steph answers earnestly.

"Why?"

"Because it's right. And, well, because it's *fun*."

Barbara beckons Steph to come over to the bed.

"You're as bad as him, aren't you? Jason?"

Steph smirks. "Probably."

"Heaven help Bruce." Barbara squeezes Steph's hand. "Though he'll probably be expecting you. He always said his soldiers sought him out unbidden. All right. Sit down. We've got a lot to talk about, and not much night left."

Steph pulls her chair up close, and listens.

School's already in session for the day when Steph climbs in her bedroom window. Her mom's probably either out or dead to the world, but there's a small thrill to clambering that Steph enjoys.

She's barely on her feet inside before Jay shoves her back against the window frame and kisses her, hard.

He's dressed in ordinary clothes -- no red, green, or yellow for him in the daytime -- but his hands are as unforgiving as gloves against her upper arms. She bites his lip and presses her hips to his, bucking as he lets out a groan that sounds like it wants to be a plea.

They don't make it to the bed. Jay pins her to the floor and peels off the remnants of her costume, still smelling of smoke from the bar.

"I've been waiting here for hours," he tells her like an accusation, sucking hickeys onto the flesh below her breasts.

"I got here as soon as I could. You know where I was," Steph answers, combing her fingers into his hair and grasping handfuls.

"God, you're perfect. I knew from the second I met you that you were," Jay mutters, thumbs stroking her collarbones as he kisses her mouth again. "You have no idea what the two of you looked like together. I thought I was gonna come in my shorts just watching you."

"Tell me what we looked like."

He pulls the waistband of her leggings down and strokes her, making her spasm against him and laugh, breathless.

"Do you do this with him?" she asks. "Does he touch you like you're touching me?"

"No," Jay answers. "He touches me like this." He moves his mouth to one of her nipples, twisting the other gently between thumb and forefinger until Steph has to bite her lip to keep from howling.

"Or like this." He bites at the lobe of her ear, his hand cupping her ass and lifting it from the floor.

"Or like this." And the kiss is just like the one in the bar, slick and warm and insistent.

"God, Jay." Steph can feel herself trembling. "God."

"No," Jay answers, skin glowing as he presses himself against her. "He's not. But I forget that sometimes, too."

The city is dark and alive around her, waiting for something to happen, when she hears the faint click of a shutter.

The costume is heavier than she expected. She's not exactly the same body type as the old owner, but it's close enough for now. Maybe she'll grow into it.

Steph turns. The boy with the camera is watching her from a fire escape near the apartment roof she's

standing on. She knows her hair is different, blonde where Barbara was redheaded, but maybe their smiles are the same. She waves.

Shyly, the boy waves back. Then he darts back into the night around him. Steph takes a deep breath, and turns to face the new arrivals.

Robin is grinning. Batman looks just the same as he always does. Maybe there's only one expression in his arsenal.

"Mr Freeze is threatening to kill hostages at the Grand Hotel on Warner street if his demands are not met. Robin, you're on the West side. Batgirl, you take South," Batman says, and turns away.

Robin gives her the thumbs up, and tosses her a grappling gun.

Steph wonders if there's any way she can tell Mia about this.

DISCONTINUITY

Aw no no no no *no*, the last thing Jason needs tonight is for this wannabe cat burglar to get away with a museum display. Bruce is already in a snit fit over that guy with the broken nose earlier.

Jason darts around a corner and skids a little on the waxy floor of the corridor, regaining his stride and sprinting after Balaclava Man. Who's running for the window, antique still clutched in one gloved hand. It's a weird little doohickey with two clock faces and an hourglass and a whole lot of shiny brass ornamentation; just the kind of thing that's worth a whole lot of money for no good reason Jason can see.

The guy breaks the window as he jumps through it, and Jason drops after him a few seconds later.

A split second after his palm pushes off the window frame, Jason sees that, oh shit, there's a goddamn *vortex* hanging in mid-air six feet underneath him. He scrabbles to grab at something, but only manages to make his fall less controlled as he hits the swirling cloud-shape.

Ow. Motherfuck.

Jason rubs the back of his head and sits up gingerly. He must've dropped through just in time for that jackass he was chasing to whack him over the head.

His communicator's dead, but that's no great shock. Tripping through that whatever-it-was would probably be enough to fry all the electronic crap Bruce carries, let alone a communicator and a wristwatch.

Jason stands up slowly, leaning against the wall of the museum and hoping like hell he doesn't have a concussion. For all he knows, he's woken up in some other world or something. Last thing he needs is a brain injury.

"There!" he hears, and then there's a bang and he's flat on his stomach. Oh, right, reflexes. He's ducking from... two cops shooting at him? What the hell?

"It's Robin," the one who fired says as Jason rolls behind a dumpster that smells like it's full of rotting meat. And this is supposed to be a *nice* neighbourhood.

Jason sure does love Gotham's definitions of 'nice'.

"No, wait." The other cop sounds hesitant. "Are you sure it's him? That costume's wrong. Something's off."

"Who the hell cares?" the trigger-happy one snaps, sending off a shot which clangs against the dumpster. Jason makes a dash for the next corner, hoping that it's too dark for them to get a good fix on him. "And even if it's not Robin, it's a Mask. Any Mask gets the same treatment. You forgotten what happened to Maloney and Williams?"

There's no hesitation in the volley of shots which follows Jason as he makes it into a side-road. He scrambles up the fire escape at the end of a line of run-down townhouses, then swings on a grapple line back up to roof level. There, he runs for his life.

Only when he's dead certain that there's nobody on the street below, not even winos, does he drop back down.

"Great. Bozo the burglar and me've wound up in Stupid World," he mutters, tucking his cape around his arm and smashing the glass panel on a clothing boutique's doorway with his elbow. This sorta place's not upmarket enough for burglar alarms. The large 'No cash kept on premises!' sign in the window probably helps cut down on break-ins, too. Pretty much nobody's down on their luck so bad they need to rip off cheap jeans and paper-thin t-shirts.

Jason pulls a couple of twenties out of a pocket on his belt and leaves them on the counter, reminding himself to thank Babs for the idea of carrying cash when in-costume. He's left at least twice what the clothes are worth, plus the cost of a

replacement pane of glass for the door. He hopes it's enough to put him square with karma.

There's nothing much he can do about his shoes, but jeans two sizes too big fall low enough to mostly cover them, and the rest of the suit fits into a ball within a second t-shirt inside a plastic bag. It's not exactly debonair, as disguises go, but if it keeps the Stupid World cops from making Swiss cheese out of him Jason doesn't care so much about fashion.

He's never going to bitch about rough patrols being 'not his night' ever again. Right now, he's most likely gonna see the sun come up over someplace not his *planet*, which is easily ten times worse than just a crummy evening.

He flags a cab down and gives the driver the address of the Manor, hoping that he's still got enough on him for the fare. Jason sometimes did a little cash-in-hand waiter work for the pizza place near where he lived in Crime Alley, and he makes a point never to stiff anyone on payment or tips if he can help it. It's stuff like that which separates being a wise-ass punk from being a straight-out jerk.

Turns out he's got just enough to cover the trip, so Jason gives the driver a grin and jogs up the driveway. The Manor is -

A different building.

He lets himself swear for a couple of minutes at the foot of the stairs. For some reason that seems naive and stupid now, Jason expected everything to be normal *here*.

What if Batman's a bad guy in this world, and that's why the cops were shooting? Or, even worse, what if Bruce isn't Batman at all? What's he gonna

think about some teenager showing up and claiming to be his partner?

What if... oh god, oh shit... what if Dick's still Robin here?

Slowly, terrified, Jason walks up the stairs to the front door and rings the bell.

Half a minute or so later - Jason counts under his breath, but he always counts too fast and his watch is still fried - the door opens. Alfred's holding a can of knockout spray *ohforcriingoutloud* -

"Whoa!" Jason takes a step back and holds his arms out in front of himself, palms splayed out. The bag holding his uniform falls to his feet. "Hold on a second!"

Alfred doesn't move, but since he doesn't spray the can Jason thinks it's probably a victory.

"Look, I know this sounds crazy but I'm supposed to live here. Something's gone messed up and the whole world's wrong." Jason breathes in and tries to stay cool, but Alfred's looking at him like he's an enemy. A bad enemy, like Two-Face or the Joker or something. "My name's Jason Todd. You're Alfred Pennyworth, and you're -"

"I am quite aware of my own name and identity. The truth of yours remains to be seen."

Jason bites back another string of curses. Alfred always gives him a Look when he resorts to words like that when pissed. "I'm... okay, this is like one of those 'how do I know you're really who you say you are' deals, right?"

"It would take a miracle for you to convince me that you are Jason Todd." Alfred's voice sounds like it could cut diamond. Into a million tiny pieces. Which he'd then throw in someone's face. Jason,

who for once isn't making up even little white lies like 'teachers never give homework on Fridays anymore' or 'I didn't kick that guy in the balls so hard he threw up, he did that all by himself', feels like he should apologise for not telling the truth.

"A miracle? Like turning coffee into decaf? Because you do that all the time. I have to get off the school bus two stops early to get a cup on the way in the afternoons, because I know you never put the jar of the real stuff where I'll find it."

Being able to banter in a tight spot is pretty much rule number one in the Robin handbook.

Alfred doesn't shift expression. "Whatever threat you think you pose, do not think that I will hesitate a second to neutralize it. No matter what face you wear."

"Okay, now you're fucking freaking me out."

"That makes us even, then."

"Alfred, *please*, talk to me. I think I'm maybe dying of a brain hemorrhage right now, okay? Just chill out. Why would someone pretend to be me, of all people, for cripes sake?"

"What was your mother's name?"

Jason sighs in relief. "Thank God. Some sense. I was starting to think I really had fallen into Stupid World. Her name was Catherine."

"Your birth mother."

"Huh? I just *told* you. Catherine Todd. Cate Johnson when she was a kid. Will you put the stun gas *down* now, please?"

"No. Your father?"

"Willis Giuseppe Todd. Went by Willis or Joe. Can you at least stop glaring at me? I feel like I've

got peanut butter on my face or my shirt's on inside out or something."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen as of the week before last. A bunch of kids from school came over and you and Bruce pretended that you didn't know we spiked the fruit punch. I figured it was because the vodka was high-grade, from David's dad's liquor cabinet. No way you'd let me get away with drinking cheap booze."

Alfred closes his eyes, his shoulders slumping like all the air's been let out of him. He lowers the can of stun spray. After a few seconds he looks at Jason again, and his eyes are shiny with tears.

"Okay, now you're *really* scaring me. Alfred, what's up? You look like you've seen a -"

Jason never claimed to be the brightest crayon in the box, but when he finally gets something he gets it all at once. "Oh, fucking *hell*. I'm *dead*? You're goddamn *shitting* me. What the *fuck*?"

"Your penchant for italics is as robust as ever, I see." And Alfred gives him a wobbly little smile, as if swearing a blue streak is suddenly cute, instead of a hanging offence.

"No. No way." Jason shakes his head. "This is too weird. I'm... "

He turns and runs. Doesn't know where he's going, and doesn't really care. Away, away, away from the house that's wrong and the Alfred that's wrong and the whole world that's wrong, wrong, wrong.

Three hours later, Jason's sitting on the balcony of an unoccupied hotel room, knees drawn up and his hair plastered to his head from the steady rain

that's decided to show up and make this night absofuckinglutely perfect.

Batman lands in a crouch at the other end of the balcony, cape sending off an arc of droplets as it settles.

"Nice weather, huh?" Jason asks, voice a little snuffly.

"Jason."

"There was a kid. He was OD'ing. I stopped him, and he freaked out. Said I was a narc or, even worse, a Mask undercover. What the hell happened to this town? I leave you alone for five minutes and -"

The laugh comes out weird and high, and Jason shakes his head. "Sorry. I'm having a fucked-up night."

"Jason," Batman says again, and moves to kneel close by, resting his arm around Jason's shoulders so that the cape protects them from the rain at least a little. Jason leans in to the touch, taking a second's comfort in some shred of familiarity. Then he starts noticing the tiny differences in posture and muscle, and wants to laugh again.

"Back before your last birthday, I went to go get you a card. I had to ask for Alfred's help in the end, because I'm retarded at stuff like that. But I went to look on my own, the first time," Jason tells Bruce quietly, looking out at the lights of Gotham through the rain and feeling uncomfortable enough that he's totally sure that he's alive. "There was this weird one of a crowd of people all milling around. One of them's got this comic-book thought bubble coming out of their head, saying 'what if I'm not the main character?'."

"It was so random and crazy that I couldn't stop thinking about it. And tonight, after I ran away from the house, it kept popping into my head. Because at first this was all like, my grim dark future. Not mine, because I'm a *corpse*, but you know what I mean. 'Learn from your mistakes, reckless Robin, or this is what's to come'."

"But then you started thinking about what this world was for those in it. That your perception of it as a hypothetical doesn't match their experience," Batman says.

"You got it." Jason breathes out in a shuddery sigh, glad of the warmth inside the cape. He's chilled down to the bone.

"It wasn't a hard line of thought to follow."

There's a waver, held mostly in check, under Batman's words. Jason turns as best he can, so they're almost face-to-face.

"You're not going to start crying, are you? 'Coz it's not like I'm keeping things together right now, and if we're both freaking then Alfred's gonna make us drink herbal tea and go to bed early."

Batman laughs quietly at that, and tightens his arm around Jason's shoulders. "I'll do my best."

"I'm so scared, Bruce."

Jason knows he's not supposed to do the name thing when they're out in Gotham and Batman's in costume, but it's not like anybody's around to hear and he has to say it. He's so scared he wants to crawl under his bed with a flashlight, like back when he was a really little kid and still had a bed. Just lie there and breathe as quiet as possible and wait for the monsters to come.

"I know," Bruce answers, but Jason figures he probably really means *me, too*.

Jason's still sopping wet when they get back to the Cave, but Alfred's there waiting with one of those huge fluffy towels that Jason's never gonna get used to and never, ever gonna get tired of.

"Uh, thanks. Sorry about dripping everywhere," Jason says, and Alfred gives a smile that's not so much like he saw a ghost as it is like he saw an angel.

Jason smiles back, feeling a little uncomfortable with all the attention. Then he catches sight of something colorful behind Alfred, and completely forgets to be self-conscious.

"Oh, wow. This is mine? This is my memorial?" Jason gazes at the case and at the Robin costume inside it. "This is *awesome*."

"You like it?" Bruce asks, cowl pushed back from his face. He looks older... no, tired. Worn out. "There's been some debate about whether you'd approve." He gives Alfred a look which might as well be 'I told you so' in giant neon letters.

"Are you kidding? It's... well, okay, it's kind of screwed up, I guess, but..." Jason stares at it again. "I'm Robin forever. Even *Dick* wasn't Robin forever. Hey." He turns away from the memorial to look at Bruce and Alfred again. "Where is Dick? Are he and Starfire still together? Do they have obscenely gorgeous babies yet? Can they even have kids?"

"Dick was injured recently. He's recovering," Bruce answers. Jason shakes his head.

"Man, this future's like an obstacle course. I'm dead, Dick's laid up... I'm scared to ask about everyone else."

"Things are never easy."

"Got that right." Jason rakes a hand back through his hair and winces when he's reminded of the bump on his crown. "Anybody got an Aspirin?"

"Let me look at that." Alfred shepherds him towards a chair.

"Bruce, he's *fussing*," Jason whines as he's pushed down and made to bend his head forward. "I'm dead, and he's *still* fussing."

Bruce just smiles.

Jason knows that sooner or later he's gonna have to sit Alfred and Bruce down and have a big Talk to them about what he's gotta do next, but he's okay with it being a 'later' rather than a 'sooner'. Being happy to see him seems to have made them both temporarily forget that he's a bit of a jerk from time to time (never without justification, and only rarely, but still. Sometimes he's a jerk, and he knows it), and it's always nice to feel appreciated.

It's not like he can rock up to his old school, and he hasn't even bothered suggesting that he's still fine with going out on patrols with Batman - it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that Bruce and Alfred would flip the hell out if he even breathed in the general direction of the idea - so there's not much for him to do, except get in Alfred's way and mooch around the manor.

The new building's pretty cool. When he asked why they tore the old one down, Bruce gave him a

really worried look. Jason's getting tired of worried looks.

"I've seen my suit in a glass case. Seriously, I think the space time continuum has been as messed with as it can be. What more harm can you do?"

So Bruce told him about the earthquake, and about Gotham afterward. He even told Jason a little bit about Cassandra, the new Batgirl, and his voice sounded really proud while he talked about her. Jason hopes she's still gonna show up, when he goes home and makes sure things go like they should've.

He's going to give that whole 'dying young' deal a miss, for starters. Old and boring the shit out of a bunch of bratty grandkids, that's the way to go.

On the third day he's sitting in the least formal of the rooms downstairs, reading a magazine and deciding that celebrities are just as boring and stupid in the future as they are in the present, when he sees something near the window.

At first he thinks it's just his imagination. He hasn't been sleeping well, which is no great surprise, and the sunlight's pretty bright.

But then there's another movement, and Jason squints so he can see better against the glare. The fall of a yellow cape, the edge of a sharp smile, a curl of dark hair -

He scrambles off the couch and over to the doorway in a matter of seconds, shaking so hard his vision blurs.

The shape that's almost a figure seems to look at him for a moment, the nearly-smile widening before it vanishes into the air.

Jason sits down on the floor with a thump, concentrating hard on not passing out or wetting himself.

"Jason? Master Jason, what's -" Alfred asks, his feet clicking at a worried, hurried pace as he approaches. "Jason?"

"I think I just saw... me," Jason says incredulously, still staring at a point beside the window. "My ghost."

It figures that Bruce knows just who to call when he hears about what happened. Jason wonders what it would take before Bruce didn't have a clue what to do.

Alfred makes a pot of tea and Jason doesn't even bother with the usual complaining he does about how tea tastes like socks only grosser. The three of them sit at the table and stare at the woodwork. It'd be peaceful, if things were different.

They're gonna spend the evening with Green Arrow, of all people, but Jason's still too freaked out to bother wondering about that particular piece of this universe.

He's *dead*. Really, truly, forever dead. His body's in some supervillain's den as a conversation piece. His ghost's hanging out in Wayne Manor, which isn't really Wayne Manor anymore seeing as how the original building collapsed when Gotham was decimated by an earthquake. Oh, and the police all want to kill Batman and Robin.

Jason's just about had it with this week, all things considered.

Bruce rests his hand on top of Jason's and squeezes a little. He doesn't try to offer any comforting words, which Jason's grateful for.

Jason spends most of the rest of the afternoon sitting on the floor of the Cave and staring up at his uniform in its case. It doesn't seem like such an awesome thing to have around, now.

When he hears stuff going on upstairs, he scrubs his eyes with the back of his hand and stands up.

Oliver Queen and girl a little older than Jason - a gorgeous, tough-looking girl a little older than Jason - are standing in the foyer with Bruce and Alfred. Jason tries to look a little less like he's spent the day freaking out. If he was feeling a little more like himself, he'd probably say something like "You know, where I'm from, they don't build Speedys like that."

As it is, he just sorta smiles a little at the guests and feels really tired.

"Jason, why don't the two of you go look at the grounds?" Bruce asks. "While I explain things."

"Fine with me." Jason nods. Bruce'll start crying within two minutes, and that'll probably start him off as well, and regular tea's gross but chamomile's even grosser. Jason has learned better than to get really upset where Alfred can see, if there's a kettle in the area.

Looking at the grounds pretty much means wandering around, because trees and grass don't exactly hold worlds of untapped fascination for Jason.

"As you probably just heard, I'm Jason."

"Mia."

"Can I call you Speedy?"

She smiles happily, then looks down at her sweater and jeans and shrugs. "Doesn't make sense to when I'm not dressed up. So who're you when you're not Jason?"

"That's a kinda zen question, isn't it?"

"You know what I mean."

Now it's his turn to shrug. The evening's cool and there's a slight breeze, and it's nice just walking in the fresh air.

"I'm Robin, I guess. Or I used to be. I guess I still am. I've kinda... been away for a while."

"Ah." Mia gives him a long look, like she's inspecting him for something. "You didn't die in the eighties, did you?"

Jason blinks. "Uh. No." And, since it seems pointless to lie in the face of a direct question like that, he adds, "Just a couple of years ago. Three. Maybe four. I'm not sure exactly."

"That's good. When Ollie came back, he thought iMacs were the work of evil aliens. Culture shock's such a bummer of a way to start being alive again."

He's too worn out to be surprised at anything anymore. "I don't think I've been brought back. I guess it was time travel or something. I'm going home soon, and I'm fixing this. It shouldn't be the way it is."

Mia makes a noncommittal noise.

"What? You don't think it's a good idea? You don't think I can do it?"

"I think life is life. You don't get a brand new second chance from square one. You just work with what you've got, as long as you can."

"I haven't had a *first* chance yet, okay?" Jason answers snappishly. Then he sighs, and slumps. "Sorry. I've had a really lousy day."

"s all right. I've seen way bitchier behaviour from costumes much older than you."

They walk in quiet for about a minute before Jason breaks the silence.

"You ever had to deal with the idea that you might not grow up? For about a second, I thought I could handle it, and then my brain just started going 'no, no, this can't happen to me, this can't be true'."

"I haven't had a chance to do right by a kid yet, in all the stuff my parents got wrong'. 'I've got so much that's not finished inside me'," Mia offers quietly.

Jason nods. "Yeah. Sucks, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. But, like I said. You work with what you've got. It's the best way to cope."

"Thanks for the advice."

"No problem."

She gives him a little, thoughtful smile. Jason smiles back, and hopes that he'll still get to meet her when the world's put right.

When they go back to the house, Jason and Oliver are left alone in Bruce's study while everyone else makes themselves scarce. They sit in two of the big armchairs that always make Jason feel like he's about five years old. Trust Bruce to find furniture that looms.

"I hear you saw your own ghost."

Jason nods. "Yeah."

"I met myself in Heaven."

For a second, all Jason can do is blink, but then he laughs. It's great to have a reason to laugh. "Okay, you win that one."

"I saw you there, too."

Jason's laughter trails off and he rubs at his face with his palms. "I guess that should comfort me, huh? That I made the cut?"

"If I were you, that wouldn't be my first reaction," Oliver answers.

"I think, at this point, I'm fresh out of reactions. I could probably manage another freak-out or two, but that's about it."

"It gets easier. The really strange stuff stops feeling so strange."

"Strange stuff like iMac computers?" Jason asks as blandly as he can manage. Dead or alive or whatever, it wouldn't be right to let a chance at a dig like that pass by.

Oliver smirks. "She told you about that, huh?"

"I think it was meant to make me feel better about my own deal."

"Did it work?"

"A little, I guess." Jason shrugs. He's not sure what he's supposed to say. "I guess I'm glad I'm not the only guy this has happened to."

"Between you, me, and the big blue, we could start a support group."

"Huh?"

"After your time. And mine, for that matter. Never mind."

"I'm getting really tired of hearing that. How am I supposed to fix stuff if I don't even know what goes wrong?" Jason scowls, knowing that the expression makes him look like a total brat but not really

caring. Why can't he get a straight answer from anyone about anything?

"Fix stuff?"

"Well, I can't stay here, can I? Won't it mess up the universe or time or whatever?"

Oliver's brow furrows and he gives Jason a long look before speaking. "Have you talked to the head of Team Spooky about this yet?"

"Are you kidding? He'd chain me up! No way he'd let me get away with it."

"You were planning on finding a way to time-travel, without any help, and then leave without telling him you're going?"

"It's not gonna matter anyway. I'm not going to let the world turn into this. It can't." Jason clenches his jaw and blinks hard and wills himself not to get worked up. "Didn't you ever feel like that? That there had to be some way to undo everything that had turned out wrong?"

"The past is the past."

"But it's *not* the past!" Jason shouts, standing up. "It's my present! This is the future, and the future's not set, *ever*."

"Calm down."

Jason knows that Oliver's being way calmer and quieter than he's usually known for being. Probably out of sympathy or something like that. It just makes Jason feel angrier, and even more lost than usual. Why can't anybody just act normal around him? Mia's the only one who hasn't looked at him like -

No goddamn way he's finishing that thought with *like someone died*. Fuck that.

"No, I won't calm down. This is bullshit. I'm *not* letting this happen!"

"Jason."

Hell.

Jason turns, and has to hold back a flinch when he sees Bruce standing in the doorway.

"What'd you hear?" Jason asks, uncurling his hands from the fists they've balled themselves into at his sides.

"Enough." Bruce says, and sighs. "Perhaps you and Mia had better go," he tells Oliver, who nods.

"Bruce, I'm -" Jason starts to say, because he really is sorry. It was a crummy way to break the news.

"Let's go downstairs," Bruce cuts him off, turning away without another word.

Jason swears at himself in his head for a while. There doesn't seem to be any choice but to follow.

"When you told me and Alfred the story of Anson's Taktgeber-"

"The what?"

"The weird brass clock doohickey," Bruce clarifies, turning to look at Jason as they descend the stairs down into the Cave. "I checked the museum's records. It's never been stolen."

"Wait, so -"

"This isn't the same reality as the one you know as home."

"Are you serious? That means this isn't what's going to happen! Because if it's stolen where I'm from, then things are already different." Jason says happily, his bad mood blending into the air and vanishing as easy as smoke. "It means that -"

"You could stay."

The words are barely more than a whisper, and Bruce isn't looking at Jason. He's staring at the case. "There would be no continuum disruption if you didn't return."

"Bruce?"

"He would recover in time... the Bruce you know. It would be easier to move on from a beloved friend and ally who ran off into the night than it was to..."

Jason can't help but look at the case as well. He thinks of the ghost upstairs, the thin-air smile and the memory of a cape.

"It means that I can't fix it for you, doesn't it? You're the main character here. And I can't change it by going back and doing things right, because that'd happen somewhere else."

It's stupid and fucked up and unfair. Jason wants to punch something.

Bruce bows his head. "Yes."

"Well..." Jason tries to think of what to say. "*Fuck.*"

There's a split second of smile on Bruce's face. He still won't look at Jason.

"Would you have told me, if you hadn't overheard? If you didn't know I was planning to find a way back?"

"I don't know." Bruce shakes his head. After a second he echoes himself in a whisper. "I don't know."

"I'm sorry." It seems the only thing to say.

"So am I," answers Bruce.

Jason stays up until almost dawn. He feels like it's only fair that he thinks really hard before making any decisions.

He knows what he's gonna pick in the end, but at least he'll be able to know that he made the choice after considering what he might've had the other way.

It's lame, but Jason even misses the way Alfred glares at him for forgetting to wipe his feet at the door.

Next time it happens, he's gonna say 'thanks', instead of being a pill about it.

When Batman gets home, Jason's waiting for him.

"Before I go, I wanna get some names off you. All the kids you took on after I died. So that I know who to go looking for."

"I didn't 'go looking' for any of them. They came to me." Bruce pushes his cowl back off his face.

Jason's not surprised that Bruce doesn't mention the fact that Jason's made up his mind to leave. Bruce must've assumed it's what would happen.

And that's pretty sad and messed up and horrible, but it's also true, so Jason doesn't say anything about it either.

"Yeah, but maybe they're not gonna do that in a world where I don't die, right? So spill."

"Perhaps, in different circumstances, it's not what they want. I wouldn't impose that on someone who didn't want it."

"You just said that they came to you. Pick one or the other. Either they're only in this because of how things go after I die, or it's what they were born for."

"I don't think this is a good -"

"Bruce," Jason interrupts. "Quit hedging. Gimme some spoilers for the future."

Bruce closes his eyes and lets out a long, slow breath. "Tim Drake. He'll be almost thirteen years old in the time you return to."

Jason scrawls the name on his notepad. "Got it."

"Stephanie Brown. Fourteen and a half. I've already told you about Cassandra. Be kind to them, Jason. They need people who care. Much more than they know."

"I won't let you down. I promise."

"Jason..."

Bruce's voice cracks. Jason drops the pad and pen, and lets himself be hugged so tightly he can barely breathe.

Jason's pretty sure that there's not going to be a single day in the rest of his life when he's not going to remember how Alfred looked when it was time to say goodbye.

He's never really thought before how much someone loving you is just a different way of saying that you have the power to hurt them more than anything else can.

Bruce wants to come with him to the museum, but Jason can't stop imagining what it'd be like for Bruce to come back to the Cave, and the case, after losing Jason for a second time. It hurts to even think about.

"Just pretend I'm out late causing trouble," he tells them both. "I know how snitty you get when I do that."

They don't look comforted.

"It's like you said, Bruce. Better to think about someone vanishing off into the night, right?"

Bruce doesn't say anything. Just gives a little nod, and looks down.

Jason takes a deep breath and slings a satchel, with his Robin suit and his notes about who to look out for inside, over his shoulder.

"Right. Um." He presses his lips together and blinks. "Thanks. I'm sorry. Don't forget me. Don't miss me too much. I'm. Yeah. Um. Thanks. For..."

Jason gives up, and raises one hand in a half-assed wave. Like he's heading out to school or whatever. Something normal and boring.

"See you."

He cuts a hole in one of the third-floor windows and slips into an area given over to an elaborate exhibit about the tombs of the pharaohs. The burglar alarms are higher-tech than what they were in the museum Jason remembers, but he's dodged past worse before.

The brass clock thing is in a glass display case in one of the smaller rooms on the next level down, and Jason lifts it free as carefully as he knows how. It'd be a serious bummer to fumble it, after all that. He'd have to head back to the house and explain that he dropped his ticket home and busted it.

Bruce and Alfred would look so happy.

Jason closes his eyes for a second, swallows, and forces himself to focus. He has to work out how to make this thing do whatever it is that it does, before anyone realizes that he's here.

Maybe he needs to turn it upside down, or turn the hands on the clock faces, or -

Or, okay, it could start thrumming in his hands and making weird whirring sounds. He feels so woozy for a second that he stops worrying, but then the whirring and the strange warm vibration stops as well and he has a moment of panic. If he's busted it, he's going to be seriously pissed off at himself.

Then the clock thing makes a cartoony 'sproing!' sorta sound, like it's impatient with him and wants him to pay attention. Jason looks hard at it, trying to work out what he's supposed to do, and notices that his watch has started ticking again.

He didn't want to stop wearing it, even though it seemed well and truly fubar'ed by his trip through an interdimensional rift. But if it's working again now, maybe that means...

He looks up. The museum looks normal.

Normal for him, that is.

Normal for the world he knows.

"Oh, thank... whoever," Jason mutters. He heads for the exit, shoving the brass doohickey into his bag as he goes.

Maybe Bruce'll let him put it on display in the Cave.

Epilogue

Three years later

"Maybe we could do this another time..." Mia says, making no move to step over the threshold of the room. Ollie puts a hand on her back and shoves.

"Hi. I'm Speedy," she manages to mumble, instantly the center of a ring of excited, noisy, brightly costumed teenagers.

The confusion goes on for a few minutes and Mia stammers replies to whatever questions she manages

to hear the general gist of. Then there's a sharp whistle and everyone goes quiet.

A girl with blonde hair loose around her face takes two fingers out of her mouth. "That's better. Let's try that again, okay? Hi, I'm Wonder Girl, but since I don't have a secret identity you might as well just call me Cassie. You've probably guessed that the green leopard headbutting your legs is Beast Boy. That's Cyborg, and the one in the S-tee is Superboy. But, again, you probably got that."

"Pleased to meet you all," Mia says when Cassie pauses for breath, giving them a little wave.

"And those two over there are Robin and Dragonfly - D's not really a Titan, so don't worry about getting on his bad side. He shows up whenever he thinks there might be free food, and then claims he has to go fight crime when it's time to do the washing up - and that's Raven, and Kid Flash."

"Once again, hi?" She's not sure what else to say. She gets a chorus of 'hi's and 'good-to-meet-you's in reply.

"Welcome to the team," the one in dark green - Dragonfly - says.

"I think saying that line's reserved for those of us who are *on* the team, Jason," Raven answers in a dry monotone.

"Ever had a friend with a really irritating older brother who just doesn't get the hint to buzz off?" Cassie asks Mia.

"You're all killjoys." Dragonfly's tone is breezy. "No wonder Robin likes hanging with you so much."

"Hey! Just because I'm capable of making the occasional non-freak friend -"

"You hang out with a leopard and a chick who still hasn't forgiven me for the one time - the *one time*, two *years* ago - that I asked her why Wonder Girl doesn't wear a Wonder Bra."

Robin sighs in a way that tells Mia that he's rolling his eyes behind his mask. Cassie glares a glare that probably could literally shoot daggers if she wanted it to, and Beast Boy turns into an alpaca and makes a rude noise.

"See? Freaks, the lot of them," Dragonfly tells her. "But they're pretty cool. To people who aren't me, at least. You'll be fine."

"Hope so," she answers, and smiles.

OPERATION PETER PAN

Sometimes you'll hear a clear, young laugh or a scuffle of feet, but you'll never see him.

Maybe he vanished when you turned. This city is Schroedinger's box writ large.

If *that* corner remains unvisited, maybe the sound of careless hands brushing grit from a tunic still echo.

Maybe there's still a thoughtful boy considering the best of his options, up on the corner of a certain high-rise.

Was that the shape of a girl with a grin like a hunter, darting into the dark?

You can tell that Batman and Gotham are one, because bright after-images decorate them both.

NEWBIE

Tim gets to the top of the stairs, opens his bedroom door, turns on the overhead light, and manages not to have a heart attack.

He settles for going "AHH!" instead.

Steph grins, and pushes away from the wall she's been leaning on. "'Hang up the cape' doesn't mean 'put the blinkers back on', y'know. It certainly *shouldn't*. You'd be embarrassingly dead if I'd been a supervillain."

"I'm not yet convinced that you're not," Tim mutters, feeling mortified at how off-guard she caught him.

He's feeling like such an idiot that it takes him a few seconds to take in how great her Robin costume is.

"Like it?" She holds her arms out and gives a slow turn. "I'll admit, I'm not sure about the skirt, but at least there are tights as well."

Tim's brain, firing double-time now to make up for napping on the job, takes in the angle of her shoulders and the set of her smile, and the way the eyes of her mask seem to be a fraction more shadowed than the level of light in the room should cause.

He wonders if Steph knows she has a passenger. He didn't, the first few times it happened to him.

"Display and decoration are an important part of the costume," he offers mildly.

Steph pokes a finger against the armoured curve of one of her breasts. "Yeah, we can't all be playing hide-and-seek in the shadows, like you," she says, giving him another slightly-off smile.

"You were looking at the suit in the glass case today, weren't you?"

Steph laughs. It's a little wilder than she usually sounds. A slight movement of her head deepens the dark at her eyes. When she speaks, it's with a voice more sharply accented than her own.

"You newbies, man. You'll be the death of me."

"I hardly think it's fair to call me a newbie, Jason. I was Robin for three years."

She sits on the edge of the bed, and pats the space beside her. Tim stays standing, and crosses his arms. The gesture doesn't look as impressive in civilian clothes, but it's safer.

"What's this 'was' crap? Dick only gets away with it because he turned into Nightwing instead. I don't see you filling up the Robin void with something new. You're just a used-to-be-Robin and trust me, you have to find something else to be, because that job's taken."

"I'm Tim Drake," Tim answers. "Isn't that enough?"

She crosses one leg on the other and begins to play with the zipper on her boot. Tim waits. After a beat, she looks up. "You thought I was going to answer that? It was a real question?"

Tim sighs. "I suppose not."

"Like I said, you newbies are idiots. You two would've danced around each other for months without my help, admit it."

Tim unfolds his arms. She pats the bed again. This time, he sits down.

"It's complicated," he says, fully aware of how lame it sounds.

"Never isn't," she answers, and kisses him.

When they break apart, Steph's eyes are clear and unshadowed.

"You didn't mention that part of the deal," she says, smirking.

Tim's about to answer 'well, you were never Robin before, it never came up', but hesitates on the verge of speaking.

He's not sure if he's the one being addressed. His head feels full, his limbs loose.

"Sorry," he hears his voice say, completely unapologetic.

"Sure you are." She leans in for another kiss.

Tim fights off the overwhelming desire to relinquish control.

"I don't think this is the best way to make things simpler," he gets out, as a gloved hand works its way under his shirt at the small of his back. The weight on his mind lightens abruptly, like a switch being flipped, and the hand's press becomes firmer.

"Tim Drake," one of them says against his mouth. "You think too much."

GLASS AND THE GHOST CHILDREN

"Oh, come on, that trick was stale before they tried it last time," Jason complains, leaning on the back of Bruce's chair as the monitors play footage of some guy in a red helmet. There's a newspaper on the floor beside the chair, bearing the headline 'The Red Hood Strikes Again'. Jason steps on it, twisting his heel. The paper rustles faintly before settling still again.

"Bring up file J419," Bruce tells the computer.

"Re-runs again? You have every channel on the planet here, and you watch the same old crap over and over." Jason pokes the back of Bruce's head with one finger. Bruce doesn't notice.

The old tape of Jason training on the high ropes starts playing alongside the red helmet guy on the screens.

"Hmph. Well, they're getting better, I guess," Jason concedes grudgingly, flicking at the tip of Bruce's ear until Bruce reaches up to scratch it. "This one doesn't look so much like Nightwing's understudy. I'm still way better, of course."

"I can't wait 'til they start trying that shit with me," Steph remarks, leaning against the glass costume case. "Cassie'll take one look at Evil Spoiler's moves and burst out laughing, you wait and see."

"You're back early."

"Unlike some people, I don't hang around leering in the windows of sorority houses when I go out for field work."

"That was *one* time. And they were conjuring up a *demon*."

Steph smirks. "If that's the story you're sticking to, fine."

Jason grins and walks over to her, leaving Bruce to his footage of Stupid Helmet Guy. "How's Batgirl?"

Steph shrugs, her face blank behind her Robin mask. "Okay, considering. Pretty beat up, but she'll get home okay."

"Good." Jason looks up at the costume case, the colours and shadows of Bruce's back and the

fighting on the screens reflecting over the thick glass.

"Associate file 'Red Hood' with folder 'Robin', subsection 'Jason Todd', cross-referenced with 'Hush'," Bruce tells the computer. Steph sighs.

"Oh, come on," Jason says again. "Go to bed before you get any stupider, boss."

"Shouldn't Nightwing be doing distraction duty, seeing that he's around for a change?" Steph steps inside the case and starts prodding at the mask. The near-invisible display supports keep it from even wobbling. "I never liked the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Not the end, anyway. The wolf *eats* her, y'know? You can't come back from that, even for revenge."

"I never minded. If you can't get revenge in stories, where else're you gonna get it? I just wish this Red Hood wasn't using my moves to mess with Batman's head."

"When villains find a theme they like, they stick to it, I guess." Steph gives up on moving the mask and starts hunting for stray threads on the uniform proper. "Now, the one I *really* hated was Snow White. Because Little Red Riding Hood was really dead and she came back, which is stupid, but Snow White was only mostly dead and they stuck her in a glass coffin and put her on display. Now *that* sucks."

"Nah." Jason stands in front of the case, watching as Steph pulls and pinches at the fabric of his old uniform. "It's not so bad. Better than being forgotten."

Steph snorts, sticking one booted foot through the glass to tap against the new brass plaque at the

bottom. "I never really planned on being remembered as 'A Good Soldier'."

"I always wondered if he had other draft phrases, Like 'A Somewhat Loveable Fuckup', or 'Mostly Remembered To Put The Mustard Back In The Fridge'."

"'Made An Effort'," Steph suggests. "'Momentary Distraction From Important Brooding'."

"He should've consulted us," Jason says with a grin. "Give it up, Robin, Alfred's too meticulous for there to be any little rips or anything."

"Hah, that's what you think." Steph grabs onto the corner of the bright gold cape with both hands and pulls sharply. It stirs, like there's a breeze inside the case. Bruce glances away from the computer screens.

"Score one for the Girl Wonder!" Steph crows.

"Okay, Bruce, GO TO BED!" Jason shouts in Bruce's face. "It's dawn out there. Remember sunshine?"

Bruce covers a yawn with his hand, blinking tiredly, and stands.

"That's a good dark knight. C'mon, the stairs are juuuust over here," Jason coaxes. "Think of all the fucked-up nightmares waiting for you."

Bruce looks at the case as he walks by, breathing out a soft sigh. Steph pokes her tongue out at him.

"If I'd known that I'd end up an undead vigilante babysitter for a bunch of people who insist on putting themselves in mortal peril all the time, I'd have skipped career day at school and gone to the mall," she remarks when he's gone.

"My guidance officer told me to look for a job in middle management." Jason sits down in Bruce's

chair, pushing against the edge of the console with his feet until he can make it swivel slightly. "You see Tim while you were in the Haven?"

Steph shakes her head, stepping down at out of the case. "He can feel us more than the others. He gets depressed when I stay too close."

"You ever read the file on what happened when he and the Titans ended up in the future?"

"Mm-hmm. I think you were watching Oracle, during the week where Bruce read it over and over. I got so bored I went to Kansas for three hours."

"Smallville?"

"Yeah."

"There's a kid named after me somewhere there. I've never looked for him."

"Mm." Steph sits back, resting her back against the computer's wide dead screen. "Has he done anything else with the file on my kid?"

Jason gives her a slightly stern look. "You made me swear on my mother's grave - *both* my mothers' graves - that I wouldn't tell you if he did. Not until the kid's eleven, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Why eleven, anyway?"

Steph sighs, drawing one knee up to rest her chin. "I dunno. When I was eleven, I felt like I'd grown up enough to not really need my parents anymore. I guess I figure that the kid'll be themselves enough that me showing up in their dreams won't hurt them. Stupid, huh?"

Jason shakes his head. "No. The time'll fly, don't worry."

"Yeah, well, these deathwish Bats keep us busy enough, that's for damn sure. Why'd you ask about the Titans thing?"

Jason shrugs. "This Red Hood thing got me thinking, that's all. The guy Tim grew up to be was... well, he forgot *the rule*."

"There's another memorial we could get: 'Eventually Got The Point'."

"Yeah, exactly. And I keep thinking about what our Tim, the real Tim, said to that other one."

"You may have learned some new tricks, but we have one thing you don't. *We're still heroes*," Steph recites. Jason raises an eyebrow. "Hey, like I said, Batman read it over and over and over."

"I keep thinking about it. That's it, isn't it? It doesn't matter if Superboy thinks you're really Robin or not, or if some guy keeps trying to convince Batman that I think Tim's a pretender, or that we died, because we're still heroes. Nothing that happens can take that away, so long as we keep on trying."

"You've been watching Alfred's soap operas up in the kitchen again, haven't you?" Steph asks, her mouth a slightly wobbly grin. "*You* shoulda had a skirt on your uniform."

"Aw, fuck you," Jason mock-sneers, kicking out at her leg. "I'm trying to have a moment here."

"Good luck with that."

"Wanna do a sweep around the city?"

"Just try and keep up!" Steph grins, bounding down from the console and vanishing into the shadows.

Jason glances back at the newspaper resting by the chair, and scowls for a moment.

"As *if*," he mutters.

"C'mon, Robin, get the lead out!" Steph calls.

Jason turns, and runs after her.

PRETEND

She lands in the alley as the second guy's head cracks dully against the wall of the bar. The first one's already on the ground, coughing up dark blood onto the sticky pavement. In his hand is the torn cuff of a woman's blouse, but whoever it belonged to has fled.

"Want some help with that?" Robin asks, tossing her hair back. Travel by jumpline has left it windblown around her face, pale gold against the bright red of the wide elastic alice-band.

The man in the leather coat and dark jeans gives her a sharp smile. The kind of grin wolves and foxes wear in cartoons.

"No," he says, and lets the second thug fall atop the first. Then he gives her a long look, up and down. "... Robin."

"Yep, that's my name."

"No, it's not."

She doesn't bother to rein in her sneer. "Hey, fuck you."

He just smiles. "You looked better before. When you were just yourself. I liked your mask."

Robin shrugs. It was only a matter of time before someone recognised the Spoiler in her moves. "You're welcome to it. I've got a new one to live behind."

The smile becomes a smirk. "Aren't you a little old to be playing pretend? You're not Robin. You never will be."

Robin almost feels bad about throwing a punch at him. After all, he took down two guys who look like they sure as hell deserved it. But no way is she putting up with any more shit tonight.

He grabs her by the wrist and twists her arm back, pinning it against her own hip. His other hand grabs at her throat, thumb pressed against the high collar of her cape, over the tear in the fabric.

"Hmm," he says. "Someone try to slit your throat, little pretender?"

Robin hooks her foot behind his ankle and pulls, snapping her head forward until it connects with his nose. He stumbles back, shoulderblades slamming against the wall.

"You picked the wrong night to get into a pissing contest," she growls, circling until she's got him in a better light. Now he won't be able to see her as well.

"Why're you playing? What's in it for you?" he asks, smile returning to his mouth even as blood seeps from one nostril.

"Why do you care?" she counters.

"Curiosity."

Now can she feel herself smiling, too. A fighter's smile. "Good thing you're not a cat, then."

"Scared I'd eat you, bird girl?"

"I'd like to see you try." It's going to be dawn soon. She should get home. She wonders if Tim's asleep, or if he's watching the sky. Wondering where she is. Thinking about her.

No, he's probably asleep.

"If I tried to kill you, think he'd let me get away with it?"

She blinks in surprise, before remembering that the lenses on her mask are down and that the man, whoever he is, can see her eyes. "What?"

"If I," he says more slowly. "Tried to kill you, would your boss hunt me down?"

"Who *are* you?" Robin asks.

He pushes himself off the wall and gives her another lazy, wolf-fox-predator look. "What about you? If you had to, could you kill someone?"

"Define 'had to'," she says, taking a step back. "Look, it's late. You're bleeding, not to mention an asshole. So I'm gonna go."

"That's a yes, then. Hold on to that. Your life may depend on it." He starts walking away, down to where the light ends and the shadows are total. "He won't save you, you know. He won't be there."

"Wait -" Robin was fast long before she was Robin, and now she could outrun any highschool track team in the state. She follows him into the dark. "Who are -"

But there's nobody there but her.

PINNACLE

It's the Thursday night before the last weekend of the month, which means Steph's got about twenty-four hours before somebody makes a crack about how it should be Titans West that's full of pretty blonde girls, not Titans East.

She doesn't hate the meet-ups between the teams, not by a long shot -- arguing with Superboy is still

far too much fun, for starters -- but the joke's getting way old. Really, it was old five months ago, when Gar first said it.

Titans East have tried pointing out that Starfire's not blonde, and neither's Holly, and that West has Cassie, but nobody pays attention to their protests. Sometimes, if Steph's feeling particularly close to a fit of inter-hero violence, Tim will give her a small sympathetic smile, but otherwise the monthly meetings degenerate into a 'pick on the new kids' free-for-all.

Not that they can't hold their own. A lot of the time, Steph feels like she almost fits better with the Titans than she does in Gotham. Because she knows there's no way she'd've ever ended up hanging out with people like Tim and Bruce and Cass without the whole vigilante thing, but she can easily imagine sitting in some high-school cafeteria with Mia and Holly. And she might've even been friends with Dawn and Kara, too, except girls like that mostly didn't mix with girls like Steph back at her old school.

"R2, this is R1, what's your location?"

Steph shakes her day-dreaming away and glances around. Her patrol's become instinctual enough that it takes her a minute to remember the street name.

Which means Batman's going to make her switch to another route. Damn.

"I'm corner of Scott and Sinclair. You?"

"Heading back to base. Will you be long?"

"Can't bear to be without me, huh?" she teases, trying to work out how fast she can finish up. Gotham's been quiet lately. "I'll be there soon."

"You could dye your hair. Say it's a Robin thing, or something. So you're not blonde."

Damn freaky mind-reader boyfriend. Steph smiles. "Or I could just carry kryptonite and... what's Beast Boy's big weakness?"

"Nobody paying attention to him, I think."

"I'll carry a special lead-lined case full of that, then. R2 out."

"See you soon, sweetie. R1 out."

The bullet misses her head by less than a foot, because she just *had* to tempt fate and just *had* to think about how Gotham's been quiet, because she is incredibly *stupid* and she's also maybe laughing, just a bit, because it's times like this when she remembers why fighting Brother Blood and Deathstroke and guys like that is *never* going to be as much fun as being a Bat.

Being pulled up through the air by her jumpline is close enough to flying that it never gets boring. She lands on the shooter's rooftop in a half-crouch, slingshot already in her hand. Tim and Mia both give her grief over her choice of weapon, but Steph figures that her continued failure to be a dead vigilante is proof enough of its effectiveness.

"Well, well, aren't we an eager little drone?"

He's standing at the far edge of the rooftop; he could drop out of her range in a second if he needed to. His helmet, blank and red save for the white ovals of his eye lenses, reminds her way too much of the black Spoiler mask now gathering dust in a box behind her winter coats.

They've all heard the word on the street, and Tim's reported two possible sightings, but none of

them have been able to confirm that this guy exists. Until now, anyway.

"You're Red Hood."

"The one and only."

She smirks, standing slowly. "Not the way I hear it told."

"You're a fine one to talk, Robin *two*." He gestures to the tiny double-numeral beside the insignia on her tunic. "Or should that be four?"

"You can call me Aunt Harriet, for all I care. Feel like telling me why you were trying to perforate my head?"

He shrugs. His shoulders are broad, but she's willing to bet that he picked his jacket out to make them look broader. "Get your attention."

"Hey, you' hasn't gone out of style, y'know." She loves the banter. Usually she's trading punches by this point in a conversation, but whatever. Variety's the spice of life, like the saying goes.

"You're here now, so what's the difference?" he points out, then reaches up to the back of his helmet.

Steph tightens her grip on her slingshot. "No sudden moves."

He shakes his head, and then pulls at something out of her line of sight. His helmet opens almost soundlessly.

"If you've got some horrible disfigurement under there, it had better be really damn impressive," she says as he pulls it off. "Considering how Joker and Two-face and Black Mask and all those other try-hards run around with their faces naked."

And then he smirks at her, and she says "Oh, God."

"No," he says, and his smile gets wider. "Wanna guess again?"

It was one of the big things, one of the secrets that Bruce gave her after... after her life went nuts and she found out what the real, unwritten initiation rite into being Robin was.

Jason Todd. The One Who Died.

Steph's spent quite a few contemplative moments staring at old photographs of the same smile being aimed at her now.

"You can't be."

"Why not?" he asks, like it's a reasonable query. "Want to ask me twenty questions? Make sure I know all the passwords and handshakes?"

She should get away *now*. Go back to the Cave, tell Bruce and Tim that Clayface is being a shithead again. Go through the disguise closets and maybe look for a wig she can wear to shut Gar and Conner up. Go back to her real life, where things make comparative sense.

She can't move.

"Your name is Stephanie Brown. You're seventeen years old. Eight months ago you became Robin, after the pretender had to quit because his daddy got cross at him. Eight weeks later you were adopted by Bruce Wayne, after your mother was murdered by Captain Boomerang. Funny how that happened, huh?"

"Don't." She snaps. As if to punctuate her, a roll of thunder growls overhead. It's going to start raining any second; she can smell it on the air.

"The pretender came back to being Robin in the aftermath," Jason goes on, as if he didn't hear her.

"While you recovered from the shock. Now you're both playing at once."

"So you're good at exposition. Doesn't prove you're who you want me to think you are," Steph manages to say.

"Sweetheart, I don't care if you think I'm Santa Claus, so long as you listen to what I've got to say."

"So say it, and stop wasting my time." She hopes the cameras in her lenses are recording. She hopes Bruce isn't watching the feed.

"Gotham's never going to change. You give it no reason to. Bad guys appear, and kill a bunch of innocent people, and you give them a slap on the wrist and lock them up in the only asylum in the world which has a rubber stamp for marking their files 'Patient Has Escaped Again, Assume An Extreme Danger Level'. It's like the city's got cancer, and you're covering its tumors with makeup."

"And you're the cure for cancer?" Her voice sounds mocking, cruel. She's glad. Jerk almost shot her, after all. And nobody gets to talk about her mom.

"Don't you get it?" he hisses between clenched teeth. "You're part of the *problem*. *He's* part of the problem; your precious Batman and his Cave of toys. He doesn't care about you. If you ever challenged his rule, you'd be gone faster than you could blink."

"You're wrong."

The rain starts falling. It's cold against her face and hair, but she's glad of it. It makes her feel more awake.

"I'm not," Jason says, still icy. "You know I'm not. He'll never save this city. And neither will the pretender. But you... you could, if you wanted. If you were willing. The city could be yours."

"What, so long as I play by your rules?" she asks, and forces herself to laugh. It sounds exactly that; forced, but it makes his face harden. Steph realizes suddenly that he's wearing a domino mask. How could she have missed noticing that?

It's like he wants her to see that they're just the same; just two kids in costumes.

"Let me teach you, Stephanie. Help me. We can make things right. Win this -"

And, from somewhere, she gets new strength, and sets her shoulders. "Win this... what? This game? This war? This is *life*. There's no winners. Though -" She makes herself turn. She knows it's not safe to have him behind her, but she can't look anymore. "There sure are some losers."

She jumps off the edge, letting herself fall for almost too long before firing her cable into a high wall.

Tim's watching the feed from her mask on the bank of screens when she gets to the Cave, giving her the weird double-image effect as she looks at him looking at an image of her view of him.

He holds her while she shakes, the stink of cold fear-sweat mingling with the always-charming scent of Gotham rain on her skin.

"True love is not complaining about the smell," she says against his shoulder. He just rubs her back.

After a minute, she gets it together enough to squeeze Tim hard and step back. "Does he know yet?"

Tim shakes his head. "He's Matches tonight, remember? Meeting Orpheus."

Steph nods. "Right. Should we go find him?"

Tim gets that little line between his eyebrows that she always wants to push away with her thumb. "Yeah, I think we should."

"So much for our weekend, I guess."

"Think fighting the undead is better or worse than being teased about your hair?" he asks, giving a fair approximation of a smile.

"I'll get back to you on that one. Come on, let's go find the boss."

"One bike or two?"

"Do I get to drive?"

"If you must."

Steph grins. "I must."

Tim tries to return the expression, but it collapses back into his habitual thinking-face. "This is going to hurt him, you know."

"I know. We'll just have to... do what we can for him, I guess. That's what Robin's for, right?"

She turns away and heads for the bikes. But, even without seeing it, she knows that Tim's nodding.

SECONDS

The sky is the hazy spoiled-peach orange-brown, that colour only Gotham ever gets, when they see each other across the rooftops. It's evening, the time which Dick always felt fit Robin best: not the day, not the night. Something between them that isn't either.

But they're not Robin anymore, neither of them, and the evening feels uncomfortable, like a uniform

outgrown. He stands and waits, listening to the wind limping in from the bay, while Jason makes his way across the ribbon-valleys of roads between the office towers.

"You playing at being the Bat, or is that leg still bugging you?" Jason says by way of greeting, the words carried on the hiss of mechanisms as he takes his -- hood? helmet? mask? -- off. He's wearing a domino underneath and Dick can't help but smile at that. The kid never could do anything by halves.

"Nice to see you too," Dick replies, wry. "Should I keep an eye out for crates of machine guns?"

The way a smirk looks on Jason's mouth is like the memory of what it used to be, honed and faded all at once. He still has the ghost of puppy fat on his cheeks, and scars Dick doesn't recognise. "Holding a grudge is petty, chum."

Dick swallows. His throat is dry. "Says the man with a lock of green hair stuck to his boot."

"He'll live." Jason's voice is breezy. He holds the helmet in his hands like it's a ball he might throw at any moment.

"That's surprisingly magnanimous of you."

"What can I say? Second chances hit my button."

It's easy to banter because it's so dangerous. That, weirdly, makes it safe, and that was always Jason's power.

A perfect object is precious, and must be guarded at all costs, but a damaged thing has already been broken, and further bruising can be risked.

Dick spent more hours than he cares to remember considering such things, once upon a time.

"Why are you here, Jason?"

"That's a rather existential question, isn't it?"
Another smirk, this one even sharper.

Dick sighs. "I'll leave that line for another time. I meant, why are you here talking to me?"

Neither of them have made mention of the immediate recognition Dick had upon seeing Jason. It seems pointless to; they are acutely aware of the common, absent trainer lurking behind their skills in detection and deduction.

Dick doubts that it's coincidence that Jason has chosen a night when Bruce is out of the city to make contact.

"I'm tracking down the killer of Samuel Allbright."

If they weren't wearing masks, Dick would cock an eyebrow. He settles for shifting his balance. "That wasn't a murder. The taxi he and his mother were riding in was blindsided. It was a traffic light malfunction."

Jason shakes his head, and puts his helmet back on. Hands now free, he reaches into one of his pockets and draws out a creased black-and-white photograph. "Look."

Dick glances down for long enough to recognise the chiaroscuro of pale and dark for what it is. "Jesus Christ."

"That was taken eighteen months ago. The kid's Samuel. I know it's hard to see his face from that angle. The photographer is either Samuel's father, or another man from the same advertising firm." Jason shoves his hand back in his pocket. "His mother sued for full custody three weeks yesterday, and threatened to go public if the father opposed her. Now mom and kid are both lying on slabs."

"What are you going to do?"

Jason looks up at where the stars would be if not for smog. The helmet obscures whatever expression is resting on his face, but Dick can tell from the set of his body that he's frowning.

"I'm going to find out the name and address of every single scumbag involved in this, and I'm going to pay them visits. And to do that, I need to use the computers in the Cave."

Dick shakes his head, as much to clear it as to disagree. "That would be condoning what I know you're going to do."

"You can't even say it." There's a sneer in Jason's voice. It sounds as petulant and childish as it ever did.

"I'm not going to stand by and let you put a bullet in some guy's head. Is that what you want to hear me tell you?"

"Is that what you want to say?" Jason retorts. "C'mon, *Dick*, let me use the computers. I promise not to kill anyone tonight if you do."

"Is that a threat?"

"I prefer to consider it a promise."

He can say no. Jason will shrug, and turn, and drop down into the air over the edge of the building. Dick even knows how his body will look as it moves, the fury held in check barely enough to keep sloppy mistakes from being made. Jason used to move like he was trying to outrun the world. Now he moves like it's cornered him, and he's ready to go down fighting.

Dick can say no. Instead he says "If you break that promise, you won't get a second chance."

Jason laughs quietly. "Been there, done that."

He expects a slew of remarks about all that's different, but Jason is uncharacteristically quiet when they reach the Cave. Jason's bike is even more noisy and obnoxious than Dick expected; the same unnervingly dark glossy red as his helmet. Like blood, just before it becomes sticky and cloying.

They stand beside where they have stopped their bikes and for a moment they don't move, the ghosts of who they used to be choking the air around them. Jason breaks the beat by huffing out a breath and reaching up to remove his helmet again, and Dick turns and says "I'll show you how to log in."

"Scared I'll hack into files I'm not meant to see?" Jason asks, though they both know the answer to that question is yes.

Dick isn't surprised that Jason stills mid-stride when he reaches the case holding the old Robin costume. It draws all eyes at the most offhand of times, and now especially seems to dominate the near-endless empty space around it.

"Hmm," Jason says. He strikes his knuckles against the glass. The case echoes dully inside itself, and the suspended mask trembles in the air.

"Anyone home?" He makes a sound which is maybe supposed to be a worldly laugh. "Sure does know how to brighten up a place, doesn't he?"

Dick says "Leave it," and is surprised at how short his voice sounds.

"Pity the kid isn't around. We could've had a reunion." Seemingly nonchalant, Jason obeys Dick's command and saunters away from the case. "Wait. I forgot about the other one, the girl. Guess we won't

be getting the whole class back together anytime soon."

"Don't -" He was easier to deal with when he struck out with guns and kicks and knives. Now Dick is remembering the uneasiness of Jason's voice, the way he said the things which were meant for the silent hours of panicked sleeplessness which plague them all.

"Lemme guess. She acted like this was all one big goof, right? Didn't listen when he said stay back?" Jason, now at the computers, looks down at the console and traces a finger around the edge of one of the keys. "I bet he'd fired her before she died."

"You don't know anything about it," Dick says, as if his own knowledge is more than pieced-together fragments.

"On this particular topic, I'm pretty much the world authority," Jason retorts. "Unless he's got a bunch of other kids mouldering in some cupboard down here."

"Stop." The snapped syllable cuts the air into stillness. "Just find what you came for."

"Touchy, touchy." Jason smirks, and sits down.

The first half-hour is endless. Dick paces, listening to the hum of the computers, and the click of Jason's fingers as he types, and the soft chatter of the bats who hide beyond the periphery of the light. Every way there is to flex a muscle, Dick tries, testing what still gives his leg a jolt of soreness.

The next fifteen minutes go faster, perhaps because boredom's rhythm moves at a different pace to impatience and unease.

The sound of Alfred's footstep on the stair breaks the weight of the quiet. Dick tries not to hold his breath.

"I've brought you a spanakopita, Master Dick. Master Bruce is concerned that your iron levels are not what they could be." Reaching the foot of the staircase, Alfred carries the bright silver tray over to the table nearest to the bank of screens. "Master Jason, I wasn't sure if you would be hungry. There's an extra serving here if you are."

For a second, two, three, Jason just stares at Alfred. Then he laughs, and it sounds hoarse and strange. "You... butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, would it?"

"One can become accustomed to the strangest of things," Alfred offers. "Including the resurrection of fallen friends. And the subsequent actions of those friends."

"You gonna give me that speech about viewing the human race as a single entity and how killing divorces you from it? I'm curious to see if it holds up to my memory."

"Whatever personal satisfaction or self-flagellation you hope to gain from listening to a lecture on the evils of homicide, Jason, I'm afraid you won't get it from me." Alfred begins to walk back towards the stairs.

"So that's it? You're not even gonna give it a shot. I'm still everyone's lost cause." The shout is an accusation, the mockery and cruelty and wounded loneliness all easy to hear.

Alfred doesn't turn, or raise his voice as he replies. "I respect your intelligence enough to give you full credit for your choices. If this is the path

you have chosen, then I trust that you have thought through all it entails with regard to your own conscience and sanity."

Jason doesn't answer right away. At some moment when Dick wasn't paying close attention, he took off his domino mask. His eyes are a blue spark on flint, just as they ever were, and the lashes spike darkly as if he has been blinking at tears. They've always looked like that. Dick reminds himself that this alone speaks nothing of Jason's real mood or feelings.

"I have. I have thought it through. All of it," Jason declares, defiant.

"Then there is little else for me to say." And with that, Alfred's gone again.

Dick doesn't move, and after a few seconds Jason whirls to face him. "Got something to say? Come on, I bet you're dying to."

"No," Dick answers, and returns to his pacing. He can feel Jason staring at his back.

After another twenty minutes, when Dick next braves a glance over towards Jason, the lines of text onscreen have been replaced with silent videos of Tim and Cassandra fighting a Bludhaven gang.

"You call him Little Brother." It's not a question. "And I was Little Wing. What should we call you? Big Bird?"

Jason glances at him over one shoulder. Dick shrugs. "If you must."

"I remember reading about people like her in biology. If a teenager's never learned words before, their brain hemispheres are all mixed up. They can

learn to string ideas together, but not tenses or how to ask questions. How come she can?"

Dick shrugs again. "I'm not certain. Possibly magic."

Jason snorts. "Figures."

"You're a fine one to talk, Dead Kid Fred."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

"Were you ever?"

Now Jason is the one to shrug. He stands. "Why don't you tell me?" He pulls on his jacket. It's made for a wearer with broader shoulders. Dick's afraid to wonder where he got it.

"You have what you need?"

Jason nods. "I have what I came for. Are you going to tell him I was here?"

"He'll know."

"Alfred'll scrub this place down. Just in case I left some green hair lying underfoot or something."

"He'll still know."

Jason smiles suddenly, unexpectedly, and it's not the unkind smirk or the nasty grin. It's the smile Dick remembers from the kid who thanked the Titans after they dragged him into an adventure that nearly got him killed. The smile of a boy who was given a chance to save the world.

"You look after him, okay?" he says. "I know you can't be Robin anymore, but from what I've been reading Robin's a grim little bastard now anyway. He needs you, especially now that I'm, you know, a bad guy."

"Jason, it doesn't have to be -"

"Hey, I believe in second chances, but I'm not retarded." Jason walks towards his bike. "See you on the front lines, Big Bird."

The bike roars like a creature from a nightmare as it tears back out into the open air.

"Yeah," Dick says quietly in its wake. "See you, Little Wing."

VISIT

This time of year, the stretch of time between the end of the working day and the fall of night is long enough to set Bruce's teeth on edge. He paces his pointless office, loath to go home.

At home, the Case burns a hole in him.

There is a tiny *snikt* sound and the two layers of glass on the window fall inward, as if pushed by the now-audible sounds of rush hour in the city below. Jason crouches on the sill, wearing his domino but not his helmet.

Bruce's office is seventeen stories from the roof of the building, and forty-three from the ground.

"Got any jobs in the mail room going?" Jason asks, standing on the ledge and jumping down into the room. Bruce hasn't turned the lights on. The shadows aren't deep enough to conceal Jason, yet. Just enough to shade the planes of his face into stark relief. "Some guy once told me that crime doesn't pay, so I figure I should have a contingency plan."

Not waiting for a reply, he steps closer to Bruce. It's just as he said it was: Bruce doesn't just think, or even simply know, that this is Jason. He feels it, in the core of every cell of his body, in the ache of his skin.

The kiss is hard and sharp, more a bite than anything else, clicking and furious and burning. The

partially healed cut on Bruce's lip splits open again, the sting barely felt as Jason's thumb drags up the nape of Bruce's neck.

"Your hair's too short to pull," Jason complains against Bruce's mouth, his breath tasting like cheap coffee. So Bruce pulls Jason's instead, and feels the deep scratch made by the batarang give way in damp wetness. They're both bleeding now. Bruce thinks that might be the first thing that's made sense since all this started.

The sound Jason's mask makes when Bruce rips it off is a raw sound, red and sore, but all Bruce can think about is Jason's eyes, blinking as if light is a half-remembered thing. The skin of the lower lids is bruised blue-grey with exhaustion, the lashes spiked and damp.

"Jason," Bruce says, littering kisses over Jason's cheeks and forehead. "Jason... Jason... Robin..."

The shove is unexpected enough that Bruce stumbles back. Jason stalks over to the window, turning to face Bruce with a glare.

"No. Never again."

"Jason." He's only a few steps away. After the distance of years, it's nothing.

The carpet is soft under Bruce's knees as he sinks down in front of Jason. He feels like he should be praying, or begging, or pleading. His hands, endlessly trained in care and precision, feel clumsy and fumbling as he reaches for Jason's fly.

Then Jason falls too, kneeling before Bruce, eyes wild and bright. "Say it," he growls.

"Jason. R... Red Hood," Bruce manages finally, tongue thick.

Jason's mouth curls up into a smile. "*Now* you're getting it."

TWO WEEKS IN STAR CITY

"Er," Ollie says.

Jason gives the Robin-patented Beaming Smile #472, which is slightly marred by the bloodied split in his lower lip. "Hey, GA. We doin' this thing or what?"

Dick sways on his feet and makes a small murmuring noise, eyes mostly lidded.

"Is he all right?" Ollie asks in a hard voice.

"Yeah, yeah. Too much indulgence at the buck's night."

"Your intended is in the habit of drinking powerful knockout drugs and then giving himself a black eye? And then getting married in handcuffs?"

"You know us Bats, Queen. We're kinky guys. Plus, I've had him locked in a basement on the outskirts of the city for eighteen days, which hits the 'two weeks' requirement. Hurry it up."

Ollie sighs and shakes his head. Why had any of them ever thought young wards were a good idea? "I'm not marrying a dead guy to his drugged brother."

"You just married my other brother to a science project in a penguin suit. *You're* dead. That cute little blonde chick who married Shiva's kid is dead. I think you're on the slippery slope already."

Dick mumbles something. Jason leans in to listen, then nods. Ollie crosses his arms, taps his foot, and thanks heaven that Batman came through the registry last week and is probably still honeymooning.

"Dickie says it's okay. He likes weddings, 'specially his," Jason informs Ollie.

"I'm not even going to ask what you're using for a ring."

Jason brandishes two plain gold bands. "Catwoman's selling them out by the queue."

The clock atop City Hall chimes the hour. Nine a.m.

It's going to be a very long day.

COLLECTOR

Jason's tied to a chair with a gag in his mouth and he can't stop thinking about Santa Claus.

About going to the mall with his mom when he was five years old, and not caring that she was in a bad mood because Dad had blown the Christmas bonus and she was gonna have to scrimp on presents again. Not caring about anything, except a sick excited sort of feeling in his stomach.

Jason was gonna find out if Santa was real or not.

He remembers sitting on the fat guy's lap and asking for the same crap he always asked for - a dog, a racing car, a set of GI Joes - and working up his courage. Then, he grabbed onto the fluffy white beard with both hands, and it came away from the guy's chin. Two thin bands of elastic straining against the poor jerk's overheated cheeks before snapping back as Jason let go.

It had been weird. Jason's heart had done a little flip up into his throat, because that was that. Things were as bad as he'd suspected, and now he knew for sure, and all he could do was deal with it and move on.

He can't stop thinking about it now, because this is just the same. He's tied to a chair in the middle of a cave and his wrists are hurting and the corners of his mouth are hurting and Batman's out there, somewhere, in the dark.

Things are just as bad as Jason had suspected.

He's a crook.

There was a time, once, where he thought he was the kinda guy that got saved by guys like Batman. A poor kid, down on his luck, nobody around to help him...

But no. He's a thief and a con artist and he would've grown up to be a hired muscle or a gangster's yes-man, just like his Dad, and now he knows it for sure. Because Batman's gonna kill him or torture him or force him to turn stoolie or whatever, and everyone knows Batman only does that if you're seriously lousy.

Mabel who lives two blocks down from Jason's place swears that Batman beat the shit out of her pimp this one time. Tony's one of the biggest bastards Jason knows, and Tony only got a broken hand and some cracked teeth.

Jason never meant to be a bad guy. Stuff just happened. Tires were an easy way to get good money, and seemed a safe enough line to get into. Nobody ever got offed for ripping off a Whitewall, right?

Right?

He's never gonna see Mabel again. She's got this great way of making eggs so they turn out all creamy in the middle. She says it's all about being patient enough to let them cool down in the pan, but Jason doesn't have eggs often enough to really get the hang of it.

She tells the dumbest jokes. He's got one stuck in his head right now.

*What has eight legs and four ears?
Two dogs.*

Only joke Jason knows about two dogs is the one about the tourists who meet the Indian in the casino and ask his name, and he says it's 'Two Dogs With A Bucket Of Water Being Poured Over Them', because that's the first thing his dad saw when he stuck his head out of the tent after the kid was born. And the tourists say 'fuck, you poor sonofabitch, that's an awful name'. And he says 'nah, my twin brother was born a coupla minutes before me and his name's worse'. So the tourists go 'oh, lemme guess, he's called Two Dogs Fighting'. And the Indian guy starts laughing and laughing.

Jason told that one to Mabel once, and she said he had a dirty mind. He pointed out that at least his jokes weren't cribbed out of the kiddie pages of the newspaper.

Just after Jason's mom died, Mabel went to hide out in Bludhaven for a couple of weeks. She came back eventually, but until then Jason had no idea where she'd gone to. The loneliness had felt like a punch, hard and fast below his ribs.

He's gotta get out of here. His wrists hurt from where he was trying to pull them loose earlier, and his mouth tastes like crap. He understands why it's called a gag, now. He keeps dry-retching against the feel of it in his mouth, and the only noises he can make are muffled and choked.

That's okay. He's gotta stay calm. It's okay that he can't call out, because it'd be a stupid idea to do that. He's in Batman's secret lair, so anyone in earshot would be trouble anyway.

He's been down here long enough for his eyes to have adjusted to the dark a little, but every time he tries to focus on the shadows they end up watering and stinging a little.

He's *not* gonna cry.

He's a crook and there's no Santa and his mom's dead and his dad's never gonna know what happened to him and Jason's just a kid and he doesn't want to die and he didn't mean to turn out bad and he's not gonna cry.

He gags again and thinks he can hear a small sound from somewhere near behind him, like someone's watching.

Maybe this is a test. Maybe, if he can get himself free, he can go.

He pulls against the bindings on his wrists as hard as he can, and wonders how much pressure it takes to dislocate a thumb.

Footsteps. There's footsteps somewhere, and a voice calling for someone named Dick.

He's not going to cry out he's not going to cry out he's not -

"Help!" Jason screams, but it comes out as a panicked whine.

Oh, thank Christ, it's some old English guy who doesn't seem to wanna hurt Jason or anything. He unties the gag and Jason's too busy gasping for air he didn't even know he wasn't getting to notice anything else for a minute.

When he starts paying attention again, he realises that the old guy's talking to Batman like they're old pals. The disappointment and fear Jason feels is ten times worse than before, because for a second there he thought he might actually get out of this.

Batman's asking for... sandwiches?

Jason can't remember the last time he had food, and it's pathetic how grateful he feels to think that at least he's gonna eat before he dies. He never made it up to Annette down at the market for all those times he swiped bread rolls off her after the lunchtime rush, or that twenty he borrowed from her till. Now he never will. He'll die with all that stupid garbage still stuck to his conscience.

He's sick and scared and his throat's burning and the old guy's leaving. Jason wants to cry out, to beg like a snotty little kid. *Don't leave me here please please oh God please I'm sorry.*

But Batman's got one heavy hand on Jason's shoulder, and it sucks all the noises out of Jason's lungs, and all he can do is stare after the old guy.

this can't be happening wait I didn't mean to I'm sorry no please help don't go don't

He doesn't stop.

It's funny how that can still feel like a punch.

STOCKHOLM

If everything else wasn't already so fucking surreal to begin with, Roger would be surprised by the guy's voice. He doesn't

sound any different to any of the kids in Roger's neighbourhood. Same accent, same slang.

So fucking surreal.

The guy's talking into a cellphone -- and how can he talk through that helmet, anyway? Shouldn't it muffle everything beyond understanding? -- as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

"No, Arturo... yes, Arturo... have I ever steered you wrong? You'll have all the evidence you need, I promise... no, of course I'm not working for Black Mask, and fuck you very much for saying so... I don't care what you assumed, you little snot. He sells drugs to kids... yeah, whatever. I'll see you at the dropoff."

The guy shuts the call off, and turns. "You hungry?"

Roger nods. He doesn't want to risk talking, in case he gets gagged again.

"I bought you some sandwiches down at the deli. Roast beef okay?"

Roger nods again, even though he hates roast beef. He swallows, throat dry with thirst. "Can you untie my hands, please? I won't run away."

That makes the guy pause and stand still, like Roger's surprised him somehow. Then he nods, and moves around to the back of the chair.

"Ever hear about that serial killer last year?" the guy asks as he unties the cords on Roger's wrists. His thumbs soothe the places where the skin got rubbed, and Roger tries not to shudder at the touch. This is all too weird to sink in properly.

"The one who killed families?" Roger asks.

"Yeah. Know why it was happening?" The guy doesn't wait for a response. "Killer was hunting for Robin. Batman's buddy, y'know? Chasing down kids who might've been candidates. Knocking them off."

"Why?"

The guy laughs, like Roger's told an incredibly clever joke or something. "Who the hell knows? Everyone's got their motivations, I guess."

Roger figures that he's most likely doomed already, so he might as well keep talking. "Was it you?"

Roger can hear the guy stand, and walk around to the front of the chair. He crouches down so that his mask's at Roger's eye level. "Nope."

"Why am I here? What are you going to do to me?" His hands are shaking in his lap. He's not sure if it's because they've been tied up for hours or because he's starting to get real scared.

The guy pats his shoulder. "You're Gotham's brand new Robin."

Roger can feel his eyes get wide. He starts to shake even more. He doesn't want to die. This isn't fair. There's this new girl at school with great legs that he hasn't even had a chance to talk to yet, and his Dad's been talking about teaching him to drive, and...

"Don't be scared," the guy says calmly. Not like he's reassuring; more like an order. Like Roger's not allowed to be scared anymore.

"Please, I'll do anything, I'll get you money. I won't tell anyone. I haven't seen your face. You don't have to -" Roger babbles. "Just tell me what to do. Please. I don't want to die."

The guy stands, and walks off somewhere into the dark. Roger does his best to keep his breathing slow and steady. The guy comes back, a plastic packet of sandwiches in his gloved hand.

"Here. Eat."

"Thank.. thankyou." The first bite makes him gag a little, the bread slightly stale.

The guy just nods, and walks away again.

ONE HUNDRED KISSES IN THE DARK

She finds him in the light of dawn, sitting on the roof of his building. He offers her a cigarette, and when she declines he curls his lip and says 'It's not like it can kill you'.

Kara doesn't like the taste, but finishes it anyway. When he's done with his, he grinds the ember out with his heel and says 'So, what?'.

'I want you to teach me how to use a gun.'

'Why me? Lots of guys on your side could do it. Arsenal, or -'

'Because they're a tool you use,' she explains. 'Not who you are.'

'I read about you,' she admits one day, when they've known each other for a month and slept together twice. 'When I was learning about Earth. It made me angry.'

'Made me angry, too,' Jason answers. They're in Robinson Park, picking at the remains of lunch -- hot dogs with extra-spicy relish, and vanilla-chocolate milkshakes. 'Want to finish my drink?'

'You're trying to fatten me up,' she teases.

'Sure am. Skinny's not sexy when you've starved before.' He prods her thin hip where her shirt's ridden up.

She tenses. 'Screaming. In the heights.'

Kara breaks the mugger's jaw. Jason grins.

They both like to travel. She flies them to Brazil, to Russia, to Japan. One time, he asks for Africa.

It's night there, and cold. They stand near the outskirts of a village, looking at the buildings and figures silhouetted against the firelight.

A woman with a straight back and aged eyes approaches them. 'Never thought I'd start seeing ghosts.'

Kara hangs back, nothing more than the curve of a young cheekbone and the sweep of fair hair in the dark.

'Nobody can absolve another,' Jason says softly. 'But we can move on.'

'Not from everything.'

'Yes, Leslie. From everything.'

In the afternoons, when she visits him, Kara sits by the window and steals his cigarettes.

'Clark disapproves,' she tells him, idly scanning a newspaper three days stale.

'I'm shocked,' he answers, still lying boneless on the bed. 'And I'll bet Batman's just *thrilled*. Christ, I love your fingers.'

She waves them at him, as if performing a magic trick, without looking up from the comics page she's found. 'I wonder if I'm the only Super who knows how good the strength is for prostate stimulation?'

Jason laughs. 'Not mental images I needed, Kar.'

'Think of a better nickname, Jay.'

Three months later, wearing coats only one needs, they go walking in a forest in Germany.

She hands him a small lead-lined case. 'Diana helped me get it.'

The Kryptonite glints dully, a malevolent stare.

'If I ever need stopping.' Her voice is quiet.

Jason already has a larger, rougher stone hidden back in his room. She's teased him about it before. Its container is decorated with swirls of bright lead paint.

She hopes he'll see that this gift isn't about a rock in a box.

'I trust you, too,' he says finally, and they kiss as the snow falls.

HELL OF A QUESTION

Most of the Titans and some of the Outsiders are in the general vicinity of the hospital, so Dick's not especially surprised to run into Freddy Freeman near the candy machine at the end of the hallway.

"It ate my dollar," Freddy complains by way of greeting, half-heartedly punching the plexiglass window.

"Here." Dick digs a coin out of his pocket. It feels strange to be around so many other heroes while he's in his street clothes. Bruce won't be pleased when he hears about it. "Get me one too, if it doesn't take this one as well."

"So how is he?" Freddy asks as he punches the code for two plain milk chocolate bars.

Dick rakes a hand through his hair and sighs. "Stable. Concussed, so he keeps asking me about... about people who aren't around anymore."

Freddy, handing over Dick's chocolate, nods sympathetically. "Same thing happened to me after my grandfather passed. I kept forgetting. The nurses had to remind me, every time I asked for him. There aren't any... permanent injuries?"

Dick can't stop himself from glancing at Freddy's crutch, remembering his own recent leg injury, thinking of Babs. He can't imagine what it must feel like for an athlete to lose mobility forever. He shakes his head.

"No. The doctors think it'll be a full recovery."

Freddy gives a sigh of relief, and a crooked smile. The pair of them slowly make their way back towards the private ward at the far end of the corridor, the bedside table inside already adorned with multiple hand-drawn cards from Kid Flash.

"I'm not trying to pry," Freddy assures Dick, speaking in slow, thoughtful tones. "But... this is a lot of security, even for a downed hero. Jade and Wonder Girl are both staked out in the

basement, and I don't think there are any ways in there that aren't through the sewer. What's special about Robin's attacker?"

Dick lets out a long breath. "He was a Titan. A long time ago."

"Oh." Freddy looks like he wants to ask something more, then changes the subject instead. "Robin's real name isn't Alvin, is it?"

Dick shakes his head. "No. It's Tim." Batman might as well have ample reason to kill him; there doesn't seem much point in keeping a name secret when none of them are wearing masks.

Freddy smiles. "Nice name."

"It was your foster brother's, wasn't it?"

The smile become a little sadder. "Yeah."

"If Tim... your Tim... came back, would you be happy?"

The look Freddy gives Dick is deeply puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Which is better? Alive as an enemy, or dead? If your foster brother was suddenly back, but he was still Sabbac. What would you do?"

"That's one hell of a question." Freddy shakes his head. "Honestly? I don't know. I wish I could say that I'd want him to have a second chance no matter what the circumstances, but to tell the truth... is that who hurt Robin? Someone you knew, who died?"

"My..." Dick gives a dry, sad laugh. "Well, legally, my brother. Same adoptive father."

Freddy puts a hand on Dick's shoulder. "I'm sorry. That's terrible. I'm... this sounds awful, and I'm sorry for that, but I'm glad that Robin's injuries weren't any worse. Of course I'd be glad of that no matter what, but... that's really awful."

"Yeah." Dick gives him a tight smile. "Look, I've got to get out of here for a while. I've got a pager; Arsenal knows the number. Get someone to call if there's any change with Tim, got it?"

Freddy nods. "Sure, man. Don't do anything you'll regret, okay?"

Dick shakes his head, and doesn't answer.

Gotham's raining, like a schlocky horror movie effect. Dick ignores the weather, hunkering low on his bike and pushing through the downpour.

It only took him a few minutes to trace money trails to a run-down but clean boarding house a few blocks off Park Row. Most

of the rooms seem to be rented to poor-looking teens and young single parents, but there's one room on the top level with no letter-slot in the lobby.

Dick's ready to kick the lock in, but a voice calls "It's open!" from inside before he can.

Jason's leaning against the wall beside the room's one window, looking out at the evening-light over what's visible of the city.

"He gonna live?" he asks Dick without looking at him. He's not wearing his hood, or his mask.

"Yes."

"I figure every Robin deserves to get the shit kicked out of him at least once, and Two-Face and Joker were both busy."

Dick wishes he could say that his own beating at Dent's hands hadn't been comparable to the extreme damage inflicted by Jason on Tim, but that would be a lie. And, obviously, neither act was a match for Jason's murder.

"Plus, I hear Black Mask gets a little too into it, and Bruce probably doesn't want to shell out for another funeral before the next financial year." Now Jason does glance over, his face in a hard smirk. "What do you want, Nightwing?"

"Don't touch him again. You do, and I'll -"

"What, kill me yourself? Anything you can threaten, I can do worse. I'm a killer, little man."

"And what a pathetic one you are," Dick sneers. "Stay the hell away from us, Jason. You're loose because Bruce can't bear to take you down and haul you in, but if you dare hurt Tim again you'll see exactly what it looks like when a Robin resorts to lethal force."

Jason snorts. "See, this is why kids get middle child syndrome. You and the kid have your little buddy-buddy club, and what did I ever get? Maybe if you'd been a better family for me, I wouldn't have gone to Africa."

"Don't make what happened to you my fault."

"Why not? Everyone made it mine!" Jason shouts, eyes narrowed in fury. "Get out of here, and leave me alone. You'll never see me again unless you hunt me out, and neither will Robin. You have my word."

"Why should I trust that?"

"What choice do you have?" With a final smirk, Jason turns his face away. "Goodbye, Dick."

Dick turns, and walks away.

PALMISTRY

She likes sneaking into Tim's house. He calls it his Robin's Nest. Cass thinks that might've made Stephanie smile, so now it makes her smile. She steals food from his fridge and uses up his hot water. It comforts her to know that someone can tell when she's been in a place.

He's sprawled on his couch, still wearing the lower half of his costume, his chest bare. He's losing weight, and Cass has a momentary fear that she hasn't left him enough food after her raids. But money is not a concern for either of them, and she knows she is not the one to blame for the diminishment of him.

The new bruises are worse than usual. Tim's eye -- and it's only now that Cass notices that his mask is removed, too -- is dark and swollen, his cheek red and puffed. There are splits on his lip, purpled splotches on his arms, and scratches on his chin and throat.

He has, as Alfred might say, been put through the wringer.

Cass reaches out and turns Tim's head carefully, lightly. He doesn't wake, but breathes against her palm and murmurs something too quiet to hear.

She glares, hard, at the injuries. Perhaps this is what reading is like, for people who've done it all their lives. She can look at the bruises and watch the story unfold.

She sees *I hate you I hate you I hate you* and *Does he love you* and *Tell me I was as good as you, tell me they remember* and *You aren't enough* and

You will get him killed and then I will have to kill you.

Cass kisses Tim's forehead and drapes a blanket over him. Then she goes to catch a train to Gotham.

The city doesn't feel like home anymore, even as it's the most familiar place she's ever been, and that makes Cass sad in a way she doesn't have the words for. There must be words for it, after all. The feeling is too big for there not to be.

He's taking money off a streetwalker when Cass finds him. No mask on his face, except for the one that only she can see. He tells lies with his body.

"A pimp. How noble," she says. The hooker takes a long look at her, at the cowl and the cape and the black kevlar, and pats him on the arm.

"Looks like you got company. See you, Jay. Stay out of trouble."

"You too," he says, and pecks her on the cheek. Cass can see him say to her *This city is evil. Be harder than it. Be safe.*

When they're alone, he says with words "So, you must be... no, wait, don't tell me... Bondage Girl, right?"

"Batgirl." She knows he knows already, but she wants to name herself nonetheless.

He shifts, and she sees him whisper, like a heartbreak, *Joker shot her in the spine and then he took pictures and it was like her light went out and I've seen pictures of her now and she looks happy again but the old light is still missing.*

Then, as if remembering she's there, he shifts again, and now he's saying, viciously, *How can you let Black Mask be alive after what he did, when Stephanie is dead and won't ever make you laugh*

again. It makes Cass stumble, throws her off her game, but then she looks harder and sees that she's misread him.

He's saying *How can Bruce have let the Joker live?*

"You need us to be better than you were," she says calmly, remembering her purpose for finding him. "I am."

He smirks. "Are you now?"

"Yes," she answers, and attacks.

He's very good. Trained by the best. He's not completely expecting it, but she only gets two strikes in before he's blocking and parrying her. She swoops low, then jumps high, but he's rarely more than a step behind her.

He kicks her thigh, and she sees him saying *We could have been allies*.

She jabs his armpit and answers *Never too late*.

His knuckles glance off the chin of her cowl. *I'm a killer*.

Her knee hits his stomach. *Killers can change*.

He tries to slam her down against the pavement. *I need you to love him best*.

Her fingers find the pressure point on his jaw, and press. *I do*.

His weight falls atop her as he blacks out, and she shoves him off with a breathless grunt. Unconscious, his face looks smooth and tired. Cass touches his cheek, and wonders what will happen next.

Then she sits down, and waits for someone to come take care of him.

VICTORIES

August

"I never spent much time in Bludhaven when I was alive," Jason says in the same conversational tone he'd started their other two meetings with. Tim, remembering how he'd fared on both those occasions, begins considering which of his apartment's boobytraps would be the most useful to deploy.

Jason picks a paperweight up off the desk and throws it lightly in one hand, as if measuring the heft.

"What do you want?" Tim asks, trying to keep his voice cool.

"I don't know if Dick ever told you this, but we used to have this joke going. If someone made eyes at both of us, or at one and then the other later on, we'd say they had a Robin fetish going. Could be an upstanding citizen we were saving, or a skel, or a hero in tights and a cape. Robin fetishes all over the place. You ever get that?"

Tim swallows. "Chicks dig the uniform," he answers after a beat. He's never been overly fond of the banter portion of standoffs, but he'll make do in a pinch.

Jason laughs. "Chicks? Kid, do I look like I was raised from the dead yesterday?"

"What do you want?" Tim repeats, words downright icy this time.

"Well, as far as I can tell you're not getting any, and the people I used to mess around with all think I'm evil now for some reason, so I was thinking we could hate each other in the naked way. Or in

uniform, if you want. The Robin fetish has never been my kink, personally, but it wouldn't be the first time I catered to it." Jason gives him the wide, fuck-you smile Tim remembers so well from his photograph collection.

"How do I know you won't just cut my throat?" Tim asks.

"I'm not exactly into necrophilia. Though I kind of hope you are, since I'm legally a dead guy and all. I won't try to kill you until the afterglow's at least mostly gone. Soldier's honor."

Tim shrugs. "Deal."

It's not like he hasn't equipped the bedroom against intruders, anyway.

November

"Heard you coming," says Jason, same as always. Tim's used to it by now. It's a point Jason is determined to rub at until it becomes sore. Jason knows he's there. Jason can tell. You can't stalk a real Bat without them knowing. Anyone who thinks they can is just kidding themselves. Pretending.

Tim stands very still, letting the weighted points of his cape pull the folds of it down in a dramatic, dark shape. Jason's not the only one who's learned to spot a vulnerability. "You're not shooting these men."

Jason pulls the gun out of the holster on his right hip. It looks as if it's been fired at least once already tonight. Tim's not close enough to be sure. Jason tosses the butt from hand to hand.

The three hostages struggle against the silvery tape wrapped at their wrists and across their mouths. The park smells like damp, night-time earth,

rubbish, and mosquito-ridden ponds. A drunk shuffles and curses, somewhere out near the designated walking path.

"They were selling near a school. I have policies."

"A private high school. That's different," Tim argues calmly. "You know it's different."

"Fine," Jason snaps, and fires the gun. The bullet goes through the shoe and foot of the closest dealer. The choked screams remind Tim of a long-ago class trip to an abattoir.

Tim kicks the gun out of Jason's hand. Jason grabs at his ankle, misses, and compensates with a punch at Tim's groin. Tim can't swallow back a smile fast enough, and makes a break for the thicker line of trees behind him. He can hear the thudding fall of Jason's feet as chase is given.

There are branches low enough to whip his face, and small animals darting over bracken underfoot. Jason catches Tim's shoulder and whirls him, getting in a forceful crack of knuckles against the exposed skin of Tim's inner elbow. Tim hooks the fingertips of his glove under the jawline edge of Jason's helmet and wrenches up, knowing that the mask is set with traps and knowing that the traps are delayed for now.

Jason's domino is black tonight. Typically, it's red, though the green is becoming a frequent variant. Once, only once, it was blue, the old odd angles of Dick's first Nightwing design.

The lenses are retracted, and Tim can see the inner edges of the black eye on the lefthand side, the sick blue-grey-purple fading to green near the slightly tilted outer edge. Jason's eyes are narrowed

and sheened, the irises the same dark blue Bruce's get when something has earned a particularly intense fury.

Tim has the higher-collared, aluminium/fiberglass compound cape on for a change. It isn't comfortable -- Steph's throat was slimmer than his -- but the unfamiliar clasp gives Jason enough pause for Tim to slice through the denim of Jason's jeans with a birdarang edge, so it's worth the trouble.

"Little punk," Jason spits, and Tim can smell the sudden serration of blood in the air. Not just the denim, then.

Tim bares his teeth in another grin, and lets Jason rip the glove off his right hand. The nails are still ragged from last time, and there are bitemarks in the crescent between thumb and pointer.

Not all the stain-like bruises Tim finds under Jason's t-shirt and bulletproof vest are Tim's making. The thumbprints are too large. The darker spots don't look like the badges of a brawl.

These unexplained, impossible marks are never anywhere but Jason's chest and back, or occasionally his hands. Anywhere else would have shown, once upon a time, and old habits die hard.

The last time Tim saw Bruce, there was a new and painful-looking split in Bruce's lower lip. The last time Bruce saw Tim, Tim's earlobe had an eyelash-like black thread holding it together. Neither raised the topic of the injuries, and neither of them has anywhere near the number of marks that Jason tends to carry at any give time. Tim wonders if Jason minds that it's his lot to carry the bruises of them all.

Tim uses his newly-naked hand to unzip Jason's fly, his fingertips ghosting over the new cut on the thigh triumphantly. On anyone else, it would leave a scar, but Jason doesn't scar. Tim has tested.

Jason shoves at Tim's shoulders, rolling them both over and over on the wet, sticking, stinking ground together. Tim's nostrils fill with the scent of rot. He opens his mouth, to breathe that way, and gets stab of tongue and a bite of teeth rather than any air to speak of.

The boxer-briefs Jason has underneath his jeans feel worn to comfort under Tim's touch. The light is too low for Tim to see the colour, but the likely answer is black. Tim shoves his hand past the waist elastic and grins when Jason hisses against his mouth.

Jason rises above Tim, parting their faces enough that he can shove Tim's head back and suck, hard, at the pulse at the joint of jaw and neck. Tim keeps the hand inside Jason's pants moving as steadily as he can.

"Bought a power drill today," Jason growls against Tim's skin, thrusting raggedly, thumb pressing the inside of Tim's lower lip back against the front of his teeth. "Black Mask is gonna remember her, even if nobody else does. I'll take the crowbar along, too. Can't mess with the classics."

Tim jerks his head forward, jarring Jason's nose sharply enough with his forehead that it makes blood run. Jason spits it in Tim's face, where it splatters the lenses of his mask and the flush of his cheeks. Tim speeds his hand up, squeezing tight enough that the calluses will press.

Jason's face is sharper, harder than it ever was in the old days. Tim had thought, then, that it was a hardness which made the second Robin most obviously distinct from the first, but the streetwise sneer in the cut of Jason's smile then is nothing to the bitterness in it now.

But it's a smile that Tim gets aimed at him when Jason comes, even if it's the kind of smile Tim usually only catches in exhausted glances at mirrors, and Tim gets so few smiles in his life these days that he takes it and clings to the paltry treasure.

Collapsing on top of Tim, Jason's breath smells like sugar. His skin is bloodied, dirtied and sweaty, like Tim's own, but when they stand and part Jason will wear the veneer of it differently to Tim. Everything of Jason's is displayed as a mark of victory.

Jason climbs up to standing slowly, like he is feeling old breaks and aches in his perfect joints. He offers a hand down to Tim, but Tim knows better than to take it. Some mistakes he makes only once. Others are approaching almost nightly. If Batgirl minds being charged with Bludhaven's keeping on her own, she hasn't said so.

Gotham doesn't particularly want Tim back, but he's remaining nonetheless.

"If you're calling an ambulance for those three back there," Jason says as he settles his helmet back in place. "Let them know that the one in the grey Armani's diabetic. He's had his insulin, though. I made sure. Used one of the same secondhand needles he peddles free with his hits."

Tim knows he should voice his very real disapproval, but he doesn't like to speak more than he has to. Jason would ignore it anyway.

"There's nothing going on below Cowan Road. The police are all over the area, after a liquor store robbery earlier," Tim offers in return, sitting up and refastening his cape. Jason's pulled the same silvery duct tape he used for gags from the pocket of his jacket, and is winding it around the tear Tim left in his jeans.

"Don't die before morning." Jason turns away and begins to walk as he speaks, and this dampens the volume of his voice. Tim has heard the order often enough to guess it, though.

"You either," he replies, but as usual Jason is already gone.

DEBRIEFING

"Computer, deactivate security audio recording."

"Deactivation confirmed."

"Hey. I saw Cassie today. I'm... I screwed up. I hope I can fix it, but I don't know. I'm trying."

"Speaking of Cassies, do you remember Batgirl? Sorry. You guys had a thing once. I forgot. There's something going on with her. I'm worried. Okay, I'm *scared*, happy? I think she's mixed up in some bad stuff. Jason says he's heard that she's in deep."

"Jason's... he's this guy. I used to talk to him like I talk to you. And now I, um, do stuff with him like I used to do with you. We're not friends like you and I were. We don't even really like each other, but we

keep doing it. Yeah, I know that's fucked up. I *know*, okay? But I can't stop.

"My ex-girlfriend that you met, the Robin one... well, she and I never had sex. We didn't really want to, so we didn't bother. I loved her, and I miss her, but I... I don't... I don't miss kissing her like I miss kissing you and sometimes I'm going to fucking die because I miss your mouth so much and it's like this ice in my chest and....

"Sorry. The new compound Marvin made for my masks comes off with salt water. I know, I look like hell. I'm not doing as badly as it looks, I promise. I'm keeping it together. I won't be this wreck when you get back.

"Jason says Cassie's mixed up with the al Ghuls. That she's been trying to bring back S... someone. I guess she and I both hit our breaking point. We couldn't lose anyone else. She's using magic and I'm using logic, but it's the same thing anyway. Or maybe Jason's lying. He does that. He's dressing like Nightwing now. Maybe that makes him Nightwing. I haven't asked him. I still remember the day when I stopped feeling like I was dressing like Robin. I told you about that, didn't I?

"I think I might be gay. I know, I know, you totally called it. I think I might have been in love with you, and I think you called that as well. I wish I could ask you.

"I'm going to be Batman one day. Nobody's said it, but it's there in the air like a smell nobody's talking about. I never thought I wanted it, but it feels okay. I keep thinking about that future we saw. Everything went bad because the Titans fell apart, right? That's not going to happen. It's gonna be like

we promised. Like that stupid battle cry we all shout. Titans together. Cassie'll come back one day. She has to. She will for you, even if for no other reason.

"Maybe you'll be Superman.

"I know, I didn't say this much to you in all the years when you could reply. Yeah, I know that's messed up. I'm not good at... at really saying things. Sometimes I write letters that I don't send.

"Jason says he remembers a little of what I used to say when I'd talk to him like this. I don't think he's lying about that. I've never told him that I did it, for one thing. I guess I'm hoping you'll remember it too. Because you'll never get me saying it to your face.

"I had this dream that I saw Cassie. Batgirl, I mean. We were patrolling in the city together, like when things were all... like things used to be, before. Only it wasn't then, because we were talking about you. She asked me why, and I said it was because we die. The Bats. We die, and you don't. You're the ones who come back. She just said 'no'.

"She's wrong. You don't. Not forever. I won't let...

"Yes, I've *seen* that Wendy the Werewolf Stalker musical episode. You only made me sit through it three interminable times. But I don't... I don't think I believe in heaven, Kon. I want to, but... I need you back. Nothing fits anymore. It's all...

"I am *not* a total girl. Most of the girls we know would kick you into next week for saying so. I'm just stressed right now. I just need to.. be here for a while. I don't have anywhere else that's quiet like here. I'm sure you don't mind the intrusion. I know

I'm interrupting valuable moldering time, but I know you'll forgive me. One day."

NERVE

Behind his eyelids, the world is grey and pink. Darker reds move like formless thoughts; two figures standing beside him.

"This one always gets to me. Poor thing."

"You've got a daughter that age, don't you?"

"A little younger. This city's so cruel to kids."

A gentle touch against his cheek. Warm fingers moving on his skin.

"Well, *he* doesn't have anything to worry about, at least. Not anymore."

"He doesn't look at rest. He looks like he's fighting. See that eyebrow? My Stephanie's looks just the same when we're arguing."

"It's just a reflex, Crystal. There's nobody there."

"I guess."

When the violence and pain are over, a hand grabs his and pulls him to where the alleys are close in.

"Police are gonna show up soon. Don't want you to get nabbed along with those skels."

Her face is covered by a mask and a hood. Black and purple. These are the colours of his skin when it bruises.

"Ow. Thanks for stepping in like that. I forgot that my boobs had decided to grow, like, a zillion extra nerves since the baby. Who punches a breast anyway?"

The purple is tough against his palm. She laughs, kind and amused.

"Yeah, that's where the baby was. It's not there now." Her breath comes through her mask when she sighs. "But it's pretty selfish for me to feel sorry for myself when I'm standing next to you. Do you have somewhere to sleep? Does someone take care of you? I guess you wouldn't be here if they did, huh? Here."

She reaches into a pocket on her belt and hands him something in a wrapper. It tears when he pulls on it, and when he takes a bite his mouth fills with sweetness. He feels his lips curve. He is happy.

She laughs again. "I thought you might like that."

Even where he lives now, deep, deep down inside himself, the nightmares find him. He flinches under the strikes of invisible weapons, shivers at the burn of imaginary flames.

Heavy, soft hair brushes his arm, hands coming to rest on his wrists. He is stilled, gently.

"Shh, habiibii. You're safe. I'm here."

Warm lips press against his chin, and the fingers on his wrists stroke soothingly. "I will find a way to bring you back. I promise."

Comforted by the touch and the lilt of her voice, he slips back into the dark.

A PHOTOGRAPH OF YOURSELF, TAKEN FROM FAR FAR AWAY

Other people have names. She doesn't. She had a set of his shoulders as he talked to someone else, the

one that meant *I am thinking of you*. She had the way he looked at her. She was his *you*, the only one that counted, and that was better than a name.

Now, here in the city brought to rubble, names are like candle-flashes in the dark. They call them to each other to find out where they are.

She has nobody to call to, or call for her.

Sometimes she finds food for those near her. Sometimes she only finds enough for herself. She prefers sharing, but it doesn't really matter. There will always be another day to try again.

She meets him on a day which begins bright but turns dark early. There are two children huddled in the triangle made by a fallen cement floor, one end on top of a pile of broken pieces. The space is small, a miniature cave. Barely large enough for the two now in it.

Five large men, anger and bravado in their arms and their sneers, want it. It's so absurd she giggles.

There is a boy, and he isn't letting them take it. He doesn't look at the children he is protecting. He doesn't look at anything. He just leaps and kicks and snaps small bones.

She watches and learns him. She sees the years of fighting to stay alive, in a city which didn't admit how broken it was. She sees the teacher he had, who loved him, and the lessons that were hard.

She sees him die.

That makes her turn her head away. It *is* a death. She knows how they look. She can't bear to see another.

By the time she dares to look up again, the men are gone. The children have given the boy a piece of the dense, gritty bread which is becoming a

common staple. He chews it dully, methodically. His eyes are beautiful and blank.

Her own eyes light in comprehension. His mind is asleep. It doesn't remember the things his body knows.

She looks down at her hands. They're grubby now. Nothing in this city is clean. When there's water, she scrubs them, but still feels the blood which once coated each finger and palm. There are much worse things than for a mind to forget itself, she thinks.

Her hand touches his shoulder, and he turns his empty eyes to her. A spark of recognition, deep down in him. *Teacher*, he thinks with his flesh, reminded by something in her.

No, her body tells him. *A student, once. Like you. Now nothing. Like you.*

There is a sound, far away. Danger and trouble, always. This city crawls with it.

Everything of him that's awake and aware is pulled to it. He helps. That's what he does.

And now, it's what she does, too.

UNEXPECTED BONDS

Did Batman expect these children to be his heirs?

Nyssa has met three of them, now. None of them will become him.

The first is her sister's companion. The second was Shiva's girl, and this one shall be Nyssa's. The memory of torture can fuse unexpected bonds.

Nyssa has other responsibilities, but pauses to watch Talia and Stephanie sit together in the sun.

Talking of babies relinquished to strangers' arms, and of fathers difficult to love or forget.

Jason joins them. The new scar on his neck remains livid.

The ease between them brings a twitching smile to Nyssa's mouth.

BACKUP STORY

PAGE ONE

PANEL ONE - wide, horizontal framing across the whole width of the page. A room in the Park Row Clinic, heavily shadowed. A flurry of activity can be seen through the small window set in the room's door; the area outside is bright and full of people. STEPHANIE lies on a gurney, her face patched and bandaged. She has one hand resting on top of the sheet over her stomach.

Caption box: Gotham City. One Year Ago.

PANEL TWO - first in a row of three rectangular panels of equal size. There are two of these rows, comprising all of the page not taken up with the establishing panel above. Close-in on Stephanie's face. There are tear tracks from the corners of her eyes, down to her temples.

Speech balloon, the tail leading off-panel: Stephanie?

PANEL THREE - centre panel of the row. The door, now opened halfway. DOCTOR THOMPSON stands in the wedge of light coming through the open gap. Nurses and patients hurry around behind her. She looks incredibly tired and unhappy.

Stephanie (off-panel): I'm awake.

PANEL FOUR - end panel in row. Stephanie's face, in profile, her fair hair curled limply against her skin. Surgical tape runs across her cheek, with the outline of stitches visible below. A heart monitor records her pulse in the background, the green line the only vivid thing in the picture.

Stephanie: ... and I'm really scared.

PANEL FIVE - the beginning of the lower and final row on the page. Back on Doctor Thompkins, now framed in closer than before. The rails along the side of Stephanie's gurney are visible at the bottom of the panel; Doctor Thompkins is at her side now. Doctor Thompkins is reaching up behind her own shoulders, unclasping a necklace.

Doctor Thompkins: I was given this a long time ago.

PANEL SIX - Stephanie's hand, atop the sheet. One of Doctor Thompkin's own hands has turned her wrist, so the palm is now upwards. A drip cord leads off from the now-downturned upper skin. Doctor Thompkins is placing the necklace on Stephanie's palm; the design is a small cross of four equal arms.

Doctor Thompkins (from off-panel): It's a St Bridgid's Cross. I think we could all use a little looking after right now.

PANEL SEVEN - Stephanie's face, her hand (the drip needle now visible) resting over her breastbone with a little bit of the chain glinting from between her fingers. Her smile is brave and shaky, and still obviously terrified.

Stephanie: Thanks.

PAGE TWO

PANEL ONE - half-width, 1/3 height of the full page. An alleyway, tattered fliers pasted to the walls with rain. It's drizzling now, gutters running and brickwork sweating. A small, silhouetted figure is being menaced by a taller shape. These are JOHNNY, a young hustler, and JASON, the Red Hood, who is in full costume. He has a gun in one hand, but hasn't raised it threateningly.

Caption box: Gotham City. Now.

Jason: What did I tell you, huh? Anyone tries to sell to you, I want to know about it.

PANEL TWO - close-in on Johnny. He's fourteen years old, with dark hair. His eyes have dark shadows around them, and his clothes are threadbare. Jason, at the edge of the panel, seems to be doing his best to loom, violence radiating off his form.

Johnny: Aw, c'mon Hood. If I tell you, you wipe 'em out. Us kids need our fix, too. You cut us off.

PANEL THREE - Second row. Four small panels, same height as above. First is of Jason. Low-angle framing; he's still playing at holding all the power. His posture does not quite follow through on this, though, as his head's slightly bowed and his hand tightens on the butt of the gun.

Jason: You shouldn't do that *shit*.

PANEL FOUR - Second small panel. A figure in purple -- the Spoiler, Stephanie -- lands at the mouth of the alley from above. Longshot is framed by Johnny and Jason's outlines in the foreground to give context to Spoiler's position. She is crouched, her cape furling behind her.

PANEL FIVE - Johnny takes the opportunity to dart away. His expression is a mix of fear and frustration.

PANEL SIX - Last in the line of small panels. Close-up on Spoiler's face. Under her hood, she wears a black domino mask. The places which were taped or bandaged on the previous page are now scarred. Her mouth is a hard frown.

Stephanie: Picking on kids?

PANEL SEVEN - Same height as the small panels, but spanning the whole width of the page. Stephanie and Jason face off, both standing with legs parted. Ready to fight if need be. The rain gets heavier.

PAGE THREE

PANEL ONE - Long panel. Two thirds of page in height, half in width. Jason is lifting his helmet away from his head with both hands. He wears a domino underneath it, matching Stephanie's, and is smirking. The gun is still in one of his hands, fingers splayed to hold both it and the helmet at the same time.

Jason: Spoiler. Is it true that Batgirl won't speak to you anymore? Not that she's all that talkative, but --

PANEL TWO - First in a column of three down the side of panel one, taking up the remaining width. Stephanie, close-up on her head and shoulders. Her eyes are narrowed behind her mask, her teeth bared.

Stephanie: Shut up.

PANEL THREE - Reverse shot. Back of Stephanie's head, Jason's triumphant and mocking look. His hair is getting flattened with rain.

Jason: Hit a nerve, did I?

PANEL FOUR - Back on Stephanie. Her hands on the edge of her hood, pushing it back from her hair. Which is cut short, in a bob, and dyed black.

Stephanie: Been invited to any tea parties in the Batcave recently yourself?

PANEL FIVE - The remainder of the page is broken into four panels of roughly equal size. The first is Jason sidestepping a punch from Stephanie.

Jason: You'll never hit me, swinging like that.

PANEL SIX - Stephanie's frown has become a determined grimace.

Stephanie: Won't I?

PANEL SEVEN - This time, she hits Jason on the arm. The helmet and gun fall to the ground with a loud crack.

Jason: You're too kind. Be the killer you are.

PANEL EIGHT - Her knuckles connect with his lip, hard. Droplets of blood arc out.

PAGE FOUR

Four equal panels, each depicting Stephanie laying another hard kick or punch on Jason. She's furious, hair wild, streaks of rain on her face. The blows are obviously well-aimed and painful. One word per panel.

Stephanie: *Don't. Call. Me. That.*

PAGE FIVE

PANEL ONE - Main panel of page, takes up whole page as background. All others are inset into this shot. Focus of shot spans whole width of top and stretches down the

right hand side, making a margin along two edges of the page for the inlaid panels. Jason, lying in a puddle darkened by spreading blood, his gun and helmet lying haphazard to one side. Stephanie walks away from him into the foreground, along the long right edge of the page. Her hood is still down, and her scars look livid.

Jason (small letters, for quiet speech): Give it any name you like. We both know what you are.

INSETS - Four panels, equal size. Horizontal rectangles.

ONE - Stephanie swings across the Gotham cityscape, tiny against the looming buildings.

TWO - Stephanie standing at a bathroom mirror in a sports bra, her Spoiler costume in the sink with the faucet running water over bloodstains. She stares at her reflection, skin starkly pale against her dark hair.

THREE - Mid-shot. Stephanie, in a pajama shirt, stands at the doorway into the living room of her house, bathed in the glow of the unseen television screen.

Speech bubble, tail going off-panel: -- sparked renewed debate over the limits of costumed justice. It's eight months since the death of criminal Captain Boomerang at the hands of Gotham's own Spoiler, who remains at large.

FOUR - Stephanie lies in bed, staring at her ceiling.

PAGE SIX

PANEL ONE - Whole width of page. The Brown family kitchen, morning. Stephanie's mother, CRYSTAL, is drinking a cup of coffee at the sink, dressed in a nurse's uniform too large for her thin frame. Stephanie's father, ARTHUR -- his face

covered in burn scars -- is eating bacon and eggs at the table. Stephanie stands at the door, dressed in a private-school uniform.

PANEL TWO - Small panel, one quarter of width. Crystal tips the rest of her coffee into the sink.

Crystal: I have to go.

PANEL THREE - Twice as wide as previous panel. Stephanie steps out of her mother's way.

Stephanie (small text): Have a good day.

PANEL FOUR - Match for panel two in size. Stephanie puts the kettle on the stove.

PANEL FIVE - Half width of page, half of remaining height. Stephanie sits at the table, drinking coffee.

Arthur: Want me to drive you to school?

PANEL SIX - Duplicate of panel five, but with Stephanie's mug lowered from her mouth.

Stephanie: No thanks. I'll catch the bus.

PANEL SEVEN - Remainder of page. Horizontal shot. Stephanie steps aboard a school bus, head bowed.

PAGE SEVEN

Eight panels, two across, four up and down, all equal size.

PANEL ONE - Stephanie sits in a class of girls in the same uniform she wears, their gazes all down on their textbooks.

Ragged, yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Dear Diary,

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: I hate this place. I feel like I want to scream. I feel like that all the time.

PANEL TWO - Stephanie stares out the window, chin propped on the heel of her hand. Gotham's skyline is hazy in the distance. The sky is a bright blue.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Being back at school is weird, but Mom insisted that we use the money Dad got from the government to enrol me here.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: She doesn't look at me anymore.

PANEL THREE - Girls walk in groups around very green, grassed grounds, laughing and talking. Some sit under trees, eating lunch. Stephanie is alone in the middle distance.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Sometimes I think it was the dumbest thing I ever did.

PANEL FOUR - Close-up on the collar of Stephanie's uniform. The St Bridgid's Cross rests in the hollow of her throat.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Surviving.

PANEL FIVE - Rows of students face a blackboard. The teacher is writing 'ESSAY TOPIC: "ARE VIGILANTES CRIMINALS OR HEROES?"'

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Batman hates me now. Guess I can't blame him.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Some days I do, too.

PANEL SIX - Over Stephanie's shoulder. Her notebook page is covered in writing too small to read, with 'VIGILANTES' written at the top and heavily underlined.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: I didn't go crazy. I knew what I was doing when I killed Captain Boomerang. But I didn't do it in cold blood. I was just so, so angry. I couldn't even see.

PANEL SEVEN - Inside the school bus. Stephanie sits at the front, gaze distant out the window. Activity behind her goes on, unnoticed by her.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: He almost killed Tim's father.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: I miss Tim.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: I think about going to Bludhaven to see him.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: But I don't know what I'd say.

PANEL EIGHT - Stephanie's bedroom. Her uniform is folded on the end of the bed, the shoes and socks discarded messily on the floor. On a shelf above the pillows are two stuffed toys, a bear and a rabbit, and a stack of self-help books about trauma survival and overcoming violent experiences. Stephanie is nowhere to be seen.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: It's funny. Everyone always says revenge never helps, but I got so furious at the thought of someone else losing their Dad that I did a terrible thing... and then my Dad turned out not to be dead. Like I'd earned him back.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: Maybe it's not funny. Maybe it's just confusing.

PAGE EIGHT

Full-page splash. The Gotham cityscape at dusk, sprawling and busy and beautiful. All

the urban romanticism of the place is on display. Stephanie, in her Spoiler costume, is suspended mid-air on her grappling wire, her cape streaming behind her as she swings. She looks more at ease than we've seen her so far. Below, standing on a rooftop, Jason -- also in-costume -- watches her.

Yellow caption panel, handwritten font: But that's life, I guess.

END.

ANOTHER LIFE

There have been periods in Leslie's life best described as episodes of suspended animation. Time passes, but nothing much happens to change the routine. She wakes, she works, she sleeps. She dreams. When she wakes again, her skin is clammy and the nightmares make her joints freeze.

For six years, she lets the routine carry her like a river's current. Wake, work, sleep, dream.

And then, one day, in the mid-afternoon, the door-flap of her tent is pushed aside and Jason says "This is just so goddamn perfect I could vomit."

He's the man he never grew up enough to become, broad-shouldered and tall, his eyes still showing that hot blue flame of idealism which burns them all to ash sooner or later.

"Hi, Leslie," he says when she doesn't speak.

"Oh, God," she answers. He huffs a laugh.

"Yeah, that's what they all say." He crosses his arms over his chest. Button-up shirt, jeans, boots.

The clothes are well made but travel worn. "So do I get a hug, or what?"

He feels solid and real and warm in her arms, and when he hugs her back the stiffening in his shoulders tells her how frail she's let herself become.

After he helps her give out the evening meal to the villagers --

"I have done this before, Doctor Thompkins."

"Nobody's called me that for years."

-- they sit and watch the little girl he's brought with him play with the local children, the laughing chase-games which require no common language.

She's very pretty, with tilted hazel eyes and ringlets of light brown hair.

"Honey Hayes. Her parents obviously decided she hadn't already had enough bad luck in her life," Jason says, taking another long breath through his cigarette. "If heaven had smokes, you wouldn't see half as many of us come back, I bet you anything."

"Why are you here?" Leslie asks, eyes still caught by the joyful play of the child. "Why did you bring her here?"

"Joker. He found out who her birth mother was." Grunting, frustrated, he grinds the leftover filter under his boot. "I gave Bruce hell so many times about not killing him when he had the chance, and my own pussyng around puts a seven-year-old kid in the line of fire. The parents are dead. I got to her school before he did."

"She's taking it well. Astoundingly so."

"Apparently there's an uncle on the scene. Shows up every once in a while, teaches her how to do

stuff. Judo, hacking, all kinds of things. She says she figured that she was important. Kids never really understand about death anyway, y'know?"

"It's Bruce? The uncle?" Leslie asks. She can't bring herself to ask Jason how Bruce is, not directly. She doesn't think she'll be able to cope with an answer in the negative.

"Or Tim. I don't know. I feel like I'm starring in a bad remake of *Terminator 2* or something. Bad guy turns good, protects a kid trained in special ops."

"Sorry, I've never seen it."

"I haven't for ages. In another life, as it were." He snorts softly at his own lame joke. "In answer to your original question, we're here because it's enough of a headstart for me to line up the firepower I think I'll need to get rid of him once and for all. And because I wanted an excuse to see you, I guess."

"You know what I did."

"Yeah." Jason sighs, and they watch the little girl in silence for an endless minute. He clears his throat. "I don't still have all my scars. Some of them just... went. Gone when I came back, y'know? But there are four holes on my chest, from a .38, that're still there."

There were so many wounds. So many nights. It takes her a few seconds to dredge the specific memory up. "You were so young."

He blinks. "Was I?"

"Thirteen."

"That didn't feel young." He looks surprised. "But I guess it kind of is, huh?"

She feels her eyes well up. "Oh God, Jason, I'm sorry. So sorry."

"I didn't die that night, because of you. Because of your help. I'm not the girl you killed, and I can't give you absolution any more than you can give it to me. We can just... do our best with who we know ourselves to be, I guess." He puts a hand on her shoulder, lightly. Carefully, like he wants to keep her from bruising. "I never met Honey's real mom. We kept on missing each other, like that saying about ships in the night. But you knew her -"

"I killed her."

"You *knew* her," Jason repeats. "And you can tell Honey about her. Maybe one day you'll tell the kid what happened, too. Or you won't. Your call. Personally, I'm not planning on telling her about most of the stuff I've done for a good damn long while."

"But you will one day?"

"She's got two generations of mask in her blood, Leslie, and Bat-sponsored training. I wouldn't be doing her any favours by keeping her from fate."

Leslie takes in a deep breath, trying to hold back the sob of horror blooming in her throat. "That's why you brought her here. To show me that what I did didn't change a thing. It didn't save anybody."

Jason lights another cigarette, the click and spark of the lighter like a sharp punctuation in the muted quiet of the dimming light. The children have moved their game further away, Honey's fairer head still visible amongst them. "Way I see it, we're damned if we do or don't. Sometimes killing someone... or letting them die, if you want to get particular about it... seems like the only way to make things right. We're most likely wrong as hell to feel that way, but that's how it is."

"You've killed people."

"And I'll kill more, starting with the damned Joker. I almost hope he does track us here. There'd be something poetic in me offing him here. Poetic, or funny. Can't tell the difference, really."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Come with us. When this is finished, and we go back. I'll be a shitty parent by myself. Kid deserves a woman around, even if it's a hardass like you." He gives her a lopsided smile.

"Bruce told me not to go back. Ever."

"Yeah, and he keeps on saying that he's going to lock me up in Arkahm, yet here I am enjoying an African sunset. Funny, that."

"I don't know if I can do this, Jason."

"Only one way to find out."

Honey, running away from the other children, whooping at some game won, comes toward them. Leslie nods, slowly, glancing at Jason for a moment before looking at the girl again.

"All right," she says.

MUSIC, MELODY, STRONG

She only screams for a second. By the time Jason turns to check that she's not seriously injured, her mouth is firmly shut and the look in her eyes is the only sign of her fear.

The soon-to-be-ex kidnapper burbles wetly on the ground. The noise is sick, obscene, and Jason sees the twitch in the girl's face that tells him she'll never forget that sound no matter how long she

lives. She's three, maybe four, years old. The memory will be a long one.

"Let's go," he says, and holds out his hand to her. It's bloodied, but she doesn't hesitate to grasp it with her soft pink mitten.

He heads for a rooftop nearby where he's got some supplies stashed. The blood comes off his gloves easily.

She plays mimic to his actions, like another child might parrot a parent or sibling at a stove or on the telephone. She takes her stained mittens off carefully, laying them in a prim pile on the cement floor. Then she pulls her beanie from her head, leaving her fair hair in a wild halo, and presses it to the shallow slice at her throat. Under the lingering paleness of the shock she's been through, her skin is an elegant light brown.

"Here." Jason stops her hands, moving them away from her neck gently. "Let me put a plaster on that. You want Big Bird or Ninja Turtles?"

"Big Bird," she answers promptly. "Who're Ninja Turtles?"

He clucks his tongue and smiles, tending to the wound. "You'll make me feel old, kid. The Ninja Turtles could kick Big Bird's *ass*."

"Nuh-uh." She shakes her head. "Big Bird's the best."

"You feelin' okay? Your neck doesn't hurt too much? Did they hurt you anywhere else?"

She shakes her head again, making her red-gold hair fly wild in the battering rooftop breeze. "Nope."

With her gloves and hat gone, the only colors on her clothes are the green of her scarf and pants and the red of her jacket.

The door leading to the building's internal stairwell offers a lee against the worst of the wind. Jason leans against it, already itching to get back into the thick of the city below. He'll wait a few minutes, to make sure she really is all right, and then take her back to her family. Then the night'll be his again.

She sits down with the instant ease of her age. Kids can make themselves at home anywhere. "That man's dead now."

"Yep." Jason nods.

She considers this for a moment. "Good. What's your name?"

"Nightwing."

"That's weird."

"I'm a weird guy."

"I'm Caroline. That means music. Or melody. Mom says that's a different word for music. Or strong."

"That's a nice name."

She shrugs, as if she's never considered it by those terms. "I like Carrie better. Mom says that's un-dig-ni-fied." Each syllable gets a nod of her head for emphasis.

"You're three years old! Who cares about dignified?"

"Mom."

"Well, you tell her that she needs to stop acting like she's got a new dress-up doll and start acting like she's got a kid, okay?"

Caroline giggles delightedly. "I can't say that to Mom!"

Jason grins. "Sure you can."

"Are you gonna take me back to her?"

"In a minute. I want to make sure you're okay first. That was a big scare you had."

"Howcome those guys wanted to steal me?"

"Some people gave you a lot of money when you were a baby. Those guys wanted it."

"Oh." Caroline chews on her lip for a minute. "Do you want it? I'll give it to you, 'cos you saved me and gave me a bandaid."

"No, I don't want your money."

"Who gave it to me?"

Jason tilts his head up, looking at the haze of clouds above.

"A man named Bruce and a woman named Leslie."

"Are they the people who grew me?"

If he wasn't wearing his mask, he'd raise his eyebrows at her. "*Grew* you?"

Caroline nods easily. "Most babies get grown in their mom, but my mom can't make babies that way so she got other people to grow me. Like how she doesn't have time to clean our apartment, so Isabel visits us and makes me toast."

"Your parents *didn't* compare you being adopted to getting a maid in."

Caroline's face takes on the too-emphatic look of a kid in the process of elaborating a made-up truth.

"Yeah! They did. Just the same."

"Uh-huh. Sure." Jason snorts and pats her on the head. "You're a smart cookie, that's for sure. No, they weren't the people who grew you. Just people who wanted you to have lots of money when you grew up."

"Oh. Okay. Can I go home now? I'm hungry."

"Sure. You seem like you're gonna be fine."

Caroline brushes her pants off neatly as she stands. "Are you gonna fly through the air on your rope again? Like a pirate?"

"If you get scared, you can shut your eyes really tight. You're safe, I promise."

"I don't get *scared*," she tells him witheringly. "I'm nearly *four*."

"Sorry. My mistake. C'mon." Jason hoists her into his arms, where she goes limp and trusting instantly. It makes the place behind his breastbone feel kind of filled up. It makes him want to go find other people who've hurt kids and make them pay and pay.

"Ready? Here we go," he warns her, and then they're off.

IT'S ONE YEAR LATER...

"Want a soda? Or there's coffee. Just instant, though. Tastes like burnt crap."

"You still drink too much caffeine," Dick manages to say with a wan smile. Seeing Jason in the Nightwing uniform doesn't feel nearly so strange as the Robin costume did all those years ago. Dick's not sure what that says about either of them.

"Yeah, well, I'm making the most of all the hours in the day," Jason replies. "You want?"

"No, I'm all right." Dick folds his arms across his chest and glances around the one-room apartment. It looks like the kind of place which houses roaches as big as rats and rats as big as small dogs. "Not quite the lap of luxury."

Jason shrugs easily, popping the tab on a can of cola and kicking the ancient fridge shut. "Lived in worse. Died in worse, too."

"Don't."

"Oh, so that's another thing we're not talking about, huh? Same as we're not talking about how the whole goddamn family dropped off the map, and how we're not talking about how the papers are full of how I'm sullyng your good name?"

It's just the same as it ever was. Dick's not sure if he wants to smack Jason's head or smile at him. "It's still my name, then?"

Jason's sigh is heavy, and he shoves a hand back through his hair. "Yes. I guess. Except that you *left* it. You all fucking *left*. You left it, just like you left Robin, and so you don't get to come back and tell me I'm doing it wrong just because I'm not you."

"Hey." Dick holds his hands up. "Settle. I'm not spoiling for a fight."

There's a waft of a smell a little like plums through the air, momentarily covering the faint dampness of the apartment. Jason makes an amused sound. "Speak of the devil."

Tendrils of coiling, golden smoke, fine and curlicued as incense, seep under the badly-fitting windowpane. After a few seconds they coalesce into the shape of a girl.

"Who's speaking of what now?" Stephanie Brown asks, perching herself on the edge of the rickety-looking table shoved against one wall.

"Nothing. Doesn't matter. You guys've met, right?"

Dick and Stephanie both nod. "A couple of times," she answers.

"Do Bruce and Tim know you're a warder?" Dick asks, surprised at how surprised he's not. Death hadn't slowed Jason down, either.

"Technically, I'm not. I was a guardian angel, but after Cassie died I got kinda left to my own recognizance. I figured a dead Spoiler might as well be a Secret. And no, they don't know."

"Cassie?" Now Dick remembers how to be surprised. "My God. How did she --"

"Don't get your nomex in a twist. She wasn't dead *long*," Stephanie assures him. "Batgirls must have a better union for that stuff."

Dick leans against a dangerously thin wall, trying to steady himself. "You should tell them. Bruce and Tim."

Stephanie shakes her head, sending golden smoke out like locks of underwater hair. "It would just complicate everything. I'm okay with being 'round here, annoying Jay and checking up on everyone else when they don't know I'm looking."

"Gotham?" Jason asks her, finishing his soda. She nods.

"Where else?" Stephanie gives a tight smile. "He gave her a teddy bear."

"Told you so. You read the rules wrong."

She bares her teeth at him. "And *I* told *you* it wasn't a fucking *game*. It doesn't have *rules*."

Jason shrugs, unperturbed, and gets himself another drink. He holds a second can up in a wordless offer. Dick shakes his head.

"Whatever, kiddo. I'm just sayin', you got yourself buried six feet under because you thought Batman would never forgive you for shooting Black Mask in his pretty little head. You read the rules

wrong. People like us, Batman forgives *anything*. It could be your kid getting teddybears in the middle of the night if you'd pulled that trigger."

"Jason, that's not -" Dick starts, then cuts himself off when Jason gives him a hard look. The masks never hid anybody as well as they hide him. Or maybe his own face is the deception. Dick's never been sure of anything about his uninvited heir.

He sighs. "Does Bruce know you're doing this?"

"Fuckin' well hope so. I thought about being him, y'know. Batman. But I knew Gordon'd never buy it for a second. And there was no way I was going back to Robin long-term."

"Leaving Nightwing," Dick finishes.

"Leaving Nightwing," affirms Jason.

"So what happens now?"

"That, Dick," Jason says with a sharp grin. "Is your call."

LINEAGE

In case Lian needs to run away from running away, Dad's number is in her jacket.

A song hurts her heart. The singer's name is Natalia. She calls Lian 'Little Sister'. Lian's thirteen. That isn't little.

"This," Lian explains calmly. "Is my birthright as well.

"You're not the only kid he hurt.

"Ever seen a child on Joker serum?

"If your mother did that, would you love her anyway?"

Jason nods, and takes her hand.

The paper's black and white and red all over.
Red Robin. Red Arrow.

"Looks like I started a trend," she smirks, pulling her hood up.

THE THINGS YOU CAN'T FORGET

He has the same scars.

That is the most difficult thing in a litany of difficult things. There is so much that is unfamiliar about this boy - the merriment in his eyes as he goes through a kata with Stephanie, the trusting softness of his smiles, the lean gymnastic shape of his limbs, the fairness of his hair. Each of these is a small distance, a comforting disappointment. This is not the boy who died.

Except that his scars are just the same.

"Robin," you say, and both turn at the name. The boy, realizing how habit has caught him, grins and goes over to grab his water bottle.

"I'll get out of your way," he says.

"You don't have to," Stephanie protests. "He doesn't have to, does he?"

"It's cool," the boy tells her. "Alfred's gonna want to give me the third degree until he's convinced I'm not some evil alien. I shouldn't keep him waiting."

He walks to the stairs, pausing in front of the case holding Jason's uniform for a moment and giving it a long glance. Then, with a shake of his head, the boy leaves the Cave.

"This is so cool. Isn't this cool?" Stephanie says, rocking back and forth on her heels and the balls of her feet. She hasn't washed her face since coming back to the Cave, and the tear-tracks are still visible on her cheeks. That her moods are so changeable and intense troubles you, and once again you damp down on a second-guess against your decision to train her.

"I don't know that I would include 'cool' among my first responses," you answer her. "Get ready. We're going back on patrol."

"You're kidding, right? I mean, Ja-"

"The world does not stop simply because we are faced with problems of our own. There's a killer striking whole families. Get ready."

For a moment, she looks as if she wants to protest, but in the end simply nods. "Okay. You're the boss."

Earlier in the night, Robin had a run-in with Superboy. It left her with reduced confidence and a bad temper, and you thought it best to send her home before responding to the signal in the sky.

"If I'm the real Robin, and not just some girl playing dress-up like S-boy said," she'd said sullenly. "Then I should be coming with you."

"For you, for now, being Robin means following my orders when I give them," you reminded her. "And I'm telling you to go."

Even with the mask covering her eyes, it was obvious that she was on the verge of tears. When she left, you met with the police and discussed the recent spate of multiple murders - seven families so far, no apparent connection between them.

Based on Robin's somewhat scattered recount of the next hour of her time, it appears that this was the sequence: on her way back towards the Cave, she came across a gang fight. More specifically, a fight between a gang and a lone figure. "And it's not like I'd gone looking for trouble. I was doing what you'd told me to. Trouble found me."

She joined in the brawl, but it was all but done by that stage. The gang unconscious on the ground around them, Robin had come face to face with a male of approximately eighteen years old, blond haired and blue-eyed, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Are you... Robin?"

"Damn right I am."

You didn't have to be there to know how much of a threat those words carried. Her need to adjust, and to have the world adjust, is a heavy weight. Time will reduce these pressures, as the new becomes familiar, but for now it is the largest chink in her armor.

"Excellent. I was gonna try and get to where the Batsignal was coming from and meet you guys there, but the streets are all different and I guess I got lost."

"Wait. Slow down. Who are you?"

"Well, I'm from here, kinda. But things went really crazy and there was a big panic and scientists were being all hysterical and babbling on the television about how the world, reality, everything, was all these little cups of water. And that the one we were in was being poured back into the bucket. There were diagrams and animations, but none of it

really made any sense because nobody really knew how to describe what was going on."

"What is this, the weekend of drop-as-many-freaks-on-Robin's-head-as-we-can? Not only are you from another universe, but my universe *ate* yours?"

"Yeah, pretty much." During this conversation, both Robin and the boy busied themselves with the removal of the gang members' concealed weaponry. Robin made a point of telling you that.

"I'd be skeptical, but with the night I'm having I just can't be bothered. Why look for me, anyway? And I still don't know what your name is."

"My name's Jason, and I've been looking for you because I used to be you. To be Robin."

"Oh my God... You were after Dick."

"Yeah." The boy sighed with relief. "I gotta tell you, I'm so glad you're being cool about this. I was worried there for a while that I was gonna have a rough time."

"Why are you you? I mean, if the water's back in the bucket, shouldn't you just turn into. I mean. I don't even know what I mean. How come you're here?"

"Do I look like a qualified expert in dimensional absorption?"

"No, but. Look. Shit. We have to go back to the Cave, and we have to get Batman back to the Cave, and I'm sorry I'm freaking out and I'm sure this is worse for you than it is for me, or it will be in a couple of minutes anyway, but I think I just hit my limit for tonight. Nothing personal."

You stay out until the night is all but spent, grappling with an uncertain hope that things will have miraculously righted themselves upon your return. That the boy has been revealed as an imposter despite the DNA match, or perhaps simply vanished.

When you arrive, he is in the Cave, flipping and spinning in a complicated sequence across the mats.

"Hi," the boy says, landing as deftly as a cat and smiling broadly. "Where's Robin?"

"At home."

"She doesn't live here?"

"No."

He blinks. "Oh, okay. She seems really nice."

Aside from their somewhat unconventional introduction, Stephanie and the boy barely spoke to one another before heading for the workout area together. It is another small spark of sameness and difference; Jason's preferred method of getting to know someone had always been through physicality, but he would have opted for sparring over a practiced routine.

"She's proving to be a challenge."

"Because you're known for picking easy paths," the boy retorts. His absolute faith that Batman is a friend and ally is the strangest thing about him.

"You've spoken to Alfred?" you ask, pushing the cowl back from your face.

"Oh, yeah, we talked for ages. I think he's a little freaked out, which isn't really surprising, but it's okay now. He says I'm pretty different."

"Yes."

The boy looks in the direction of the case. "But that I'm kinda the same too. What does he mean?"

"Jason was a street fighter. You're an acrobat. Your muscle distribution is different. Your facial features are identical to his. Your voices match but your speech patterns do not."

"This must be weird for you." The boy rubs a hand against the back of his neck. He looks as if he wants to continue his tumbling, and is exerting a large amount of willpower to remain still.

He has pushed his sleeves up to his elbows and there is a thin white mark starting a few inches above his wrist on the right arm. Your memory throws up a series of flash images, the glint of a switchblade in the dark and the way Jason gritted his teeth and knotted a strip of cape around the cut before jumping back into the fray.

"How did you get that scar?" you ask, gesturing to it.

"What? Oh. I don't really keep track. I think that was a fight with a couple of muggers." The boy rubs at the mark thoughtfully, looking down at it. The angle causes shadows to cradle his face. "About six months before -"

Your breath catches and he looks up at you. "Before what?" you manage.

The boy chuckles. "Before I got measles, I was gonna say. But that's when I died, isn't it? When I was... what, about fifteen? A little older?"

"Jason was fifteen and two months."

"Wow. That's spooky. That's the same age I was when we decided it was time for a new Robin. That's really spooky." He shakes his head. "Makes you wonder, huh?"

"Why a new Robin?"

"I was too sick to be any use as Robin, and, well, there was this lady, and she used to send me birthday cards with twenty dollar notes in 'em when I was growing up, and I'd never really thought about her all that much. In the circus, you end up with a lot of unofficial aunts and uncles, you know? You don't wonder about why someone decides to care about you, because everyone's always doing it. Then at the same time as I was really sick, she died, and I found out that she was my birth mother."

The boy pauses, bending one leg and then the other up, stretching as a distraction from the memories the words are obviously stirring in him.

"It all just felt like a bit much," he goes on. "I'd spent so much time being Robin that when I had to face a big *Jason* deal without being able to suit up and forget about everything for a while it... well, it was too much. So you and I talked, and decided that I should have a couple of years to sort myself out, and then we'd see if I wanted back in the game. I let the black grow out of my hair, and you found another kid to be Robin, and that's about it. I'm in college now, but more and more it just feels like a way to pass the time. I've decided what I want to do with my life."

"This?"

His grin is bright and broad. "What else?"

The question is rhetorical, but even if it hadn't been you'd have no answer. You can't look away from him, from the small and constant movements of his arms and feet.

"Bruce, do you want me to stay in my old room tonight?" he asks, voice sounding slightly uncertain for the first time. "Until it doesn't seem so weird that

I'm here? I mean, there's probably something in the human brain that stops people really being able to think about themselves being dead, but you've *mourned* me. That deserves some dealing time."

"Your 'old room'?"

He blinks. "Oh, right. We only changed things around last year, so it didn't have a chance to happen here. When I'm not away at school, I stay in your room."

He has Jason's mouth. Jason's hands. Jason's voice. Jason's scars.

"You can stay in my room. I need to enter tonight's events into the database. I won't be long," you tell him.

He breathes a sigh of relief and grins crookedly at you. "Okay. I'll do a bit more here until you're finished. The equipment on campus isn't nearly so good."

You nod, and turn away, and take two steps towards the consoles. Then you turn again. He's doing a handstand on the hanging rings. "It can wait," you say.

"Sure thing," he answers, dropping neatly, and smiles again. Neither of you speak as you walk up the stairs and through the manor to your room.

"This has gotta rate up there in one of my top ten weirdest days," he says as he lets himself fall back onto the mattress and toes his sneakers off. "Top three, even."

"Most would rank losing their entire world as number one," you point out, removing your uniform. Propping himself up on his elbows to watch you, the boy shrugs.

"Life is change. I'll deal. C'mere." He beckons. You move to stand beside him, watching his expressions as he works at the fastenings on your belt. Concentration and familiarity and anticipation. Heavy locks of fair hair fall forward over his eyes.

"Jason was already dyeing his hair when I met him. He thought being blond made him look too young. Too vulnerable," you say without being at all sure why. The boy's hands still on the waistband of your leggings and his gaze meets yours.

Then he slides off the bed to stand in front of you, so close that your first instinct is to take a step back.

"Bruce," he says, his breath a warm puff against your chin. "Look at me."

You look at him. There is an almost imperceptible scribble of fine white lines just below the lefthand corner of his mouth. Gravel rash, from when he was knocked off the bike. He swore as you pressed the antiseptic swab against it a lifetime ago.

"Wanna know why I'm not freaking?" he asks softly. The faint trace of his sweat on the air is making it hard for you to breathe. You could never forget that smell. "Because no matter how different the world was, I'd know you in an instant. And so long as you're here, things are okay. That's the only thing I've ever known for certain."

One of your hands moves up to rest against the side of his neck, your thumb stroking the pulse-point.

"Bruce."

He has gritted his teeth, and your name sounds almost angry on his tongue. You can feel his

heartbeat through the heat of his skin. His eyes narrow in a glare.

"Bruce," he says again. "You know me."

You swallow. Your hand shakes a little as you move it up to cup his cheek. He leans into the touch and exhales against the heel of your palm, eyelids dropping so the lashes fan like dark ink etchings.

"Jason?" you manage to say, voice cracking and turning the question to a plea. His eyes flash, a smile forming on his lips. You trace its shape with your thumb. "Jason."

"Bruce." Jason reaches up to pull you down.

He sleeps just as he always did, with his cheek pillowed against the palm of one hand and his eyelids shifting with restless dreams. His other hand rests lightly on your abdomen and you can see the crooked angle of the smallest finger. He broke it as a young child, when a window sash came loose and fell onto it. The nail is ragged from idle biting.

"Jason," you whisper, the word like a drug to your system. You were speaking to yourself but he stirs anyway, giving you a sleepy smile as he blinks against the midday light. The curtains are open and the sunlight highlights the paleness of his skin, freckles faded to almost nothing on his shoulders and arms.

"Hi," Jason says. "Is it still morning?"

"Only just."

"G'morning, then." He sits up a little, rolling his shoulders. As he becomes more awake, his smile takes on a catlike satisfaction. He tilts his neck to one side and then the other, stretching out the cricks, gaze roaming over the room. "I've needed that for

weeks. No wonder nobody expects teenagers to stay in long-distance relationships." He turns to you and his smile softens. "Are you okay? I keep forgetting, well, y'know. You're okay?"

You never did know what to say when he was near. "Yes."

"Good." He leans in for a quick kiss. You catch his forearms in your hands and hold him in place for a longer moment, and can feel his mouth widen into a smile. After a few seconds you let him go and he sits back.

"Are you hungry?" you ask. Jason sniggers.

"Are you kidding? I think I've been pining for one of Alfred's breakfasts nearly as much as I've wanted to see you. Hey, Bruce." His tone changes abruptly from joking to serious. "Did I have a journal? A notebook or something?"

"You kept a passworded folder on the computer system."

Jason nods to himself, thoughtful. "Cool. I don't..." He pauses. "I don't think I wanna see the coroner's reports or anything like that. Is that okay?"

You nod. "Of course. I wouldn't have expected you to."

"I feel like I should. But maybe the diary'll be enough. You've read it, I take it?"

You nod again. Jason grins. "I knew you'd say that." He shifts over until his thighs straddle yours, fingertips tracing random designs over your chest.

"I thought you said you wanted breakfast?" You ask with a smile of your own.

"Later. It's early yet. Lots of time."

"Jason."

He's sitting on the floor, police files spread in a fan of paper and crime-scene photographs around him, and doesn't look up.

"I found these. Hope you don't mind I'm looking at them."

"You finished reading the journal."

"Yeah." He still doesn't look up. "It was intense."

"I know."

"When my dad had just started seeing my mom, there was this guy who kept offering to double the amount in Dad's bank account with just a couple of nights' work. Shady stuff, you know. I worked out later, after I found out about my birth mom and all, that I must've been a tiny baby when all this happened, but when my mom used to tell me the story she never said anything about that - how could she without me finding out that I wasn't hers?

"Anyway, they're dirt poor and they've just met each other but they know it's love already and there's a little baby to think about, so what choice do they have? They went together to see the guy, my mom and dad, and on the way the car got a flat tire. They pulled over to the side of the road, and this other car pulls up to help. This is the part that made it a good enough story for Mom to tell it all the time: the car's full of clowns. Turns out the circus is in town for a couple of weeks, and it's looking for new acts. My Dad, he mentions that he was on his high school gymnastics team, and Mom can't believe it because she's been doing ballet since she was three. So they put an act together, get married, and live happily ever after.

"Dad always said it was the luckiest flat tire in the world. I guess he was right, huh?"

"I'm sorry, Jason."

He looks up at you. His eyes are red and damp, his face calm. "I feel so bad for them, you know? Even though what happened to them with Killer Croc was horrible and all, they were so happy before that. Even with that ending, it was better than this other life they could've had. Did have." He sets his jaw and blinks hard, refusing to cry. "But I guess you know what that's like, huh? Wishing so much that you could fix things for your parents, and knowing you never can."

You nod, and push some of the files out of the way so you can crouch beside him. He's trembling.

"I was really proud, reading the journal. Finding out that even when things were that awful, I still did what I could. It's comforting to know that about yourself."

You smooth his hair with your palm and let him simply breathe in and out while he collects his thoughts. He sighs, the shudder running through and out of him like grounded lightning, and picks up one of the injury reports from the police files.

"I think I've worked out the connection between these families. Look - they've all got sons between fourteen and eighteen. Dark hair, documented athletic achievement, slight build."

You look at the photographs of the victims. Jason is right. "They're hunting the old Robin."

Her costume is new enough for Stephanie to still enjoy the novelty of looking at herself fully suited up. She turns back and forth in front of the mirror, picking an invisible piece of lint off the shoulder of the cape.

"I want to come too."

"Are you sure?" you ask. Jason does his best not to roll his eyes too obviously.

"I wouldn't say it if I wasn't. I've got a stake in this too. All the Robins do."

"You want to be Robin again?"

Jason laughs. "I wish you could remember what happened last time we tried to pick a new name out for me. It was nuts. I'm so bad at choosing that stuff. Yeah, I guess I do want to be Robin again. Provided there's no objection." He turns to Stephanie.

"Two?" She looks thoughtful. "Yeah, okay."

"I don't want a cape," Jason tells you as you turn towards the closet area. "It's been too long since I was used to wearing one. It'd slow me down. You didn't design this with an acrobat in mind."

You hesitate. The capes contain a significant percentage of the costume's total kevlar.

"I'll be better off without it. Trust me," Jason says. His voice has softened, as if he's guessed the reason behind your hesitation, the reason for the uniform's extensive protective measures.

You nod agreement, and go to find something which will fit him.

By the time night falls they are both dressed and ready, warming up with a sparring match. Jason's trying to adapt to Stephanie's less controlled, wilder style, and Stephanie's doing her best to keep up with the quick precision of his movements. The result is a fascinating and fast-paced spectacle.

"If I wasn't holding back, I could kick your ass in a second," Stephanie says, jumping backwards with

a yelp as Jason's foot misses her stomach by less than an inch.

"You wish," Jason retorts, barely dodging a punch to the jaw. "Keep on dreaming, I hear it's good for morale."

"Robins," you say. They both turn, obviously amused and pleased by the plural. "Let's go."

"I so would've won that."

"As *if*."

The home of Alan and Georgina Fitch and their son David is laden with expensive and ineffective security systems. While Jason and Stephanie move the boy to a secure location, you examine the possible entry points, predicting the killer's route through the rooms. The best attack will be to catch the intruder off-guard once they are in a containable space, such as David Fitch's room.

When you explain this plan to the Robins, Stephanie volunteers to hide in the now-empty bed. You agree because her plan has an element of surprise which will work in your team's favor. You and Jason will wait in an alcove opposite the door of the boy's room, in order to block the easiest exit once the killer is inside.

"Don't let the heat of the moment limit your future choices," you tell them when it's time to split up. It is the most important lesson, and the fear that they will not recognize all the things it means to teach makes your blood run cold.

Stephanie gives a playful salute. "Got it."

She thinks she understands. It'll have to be enough for now.

"It'll be fine, Bruce," Jason says, and you wish you could believe him.

As you expected, the killer enters through the plate glass window of the study. It wears full body armor and a helmet, the technology equal to that of the latest improvements on your own equipment.

It walks through the darkened house soundlessly, heading directly for the bedroom where Stephanie hides and approaching the bed.

With a feral grin, Stephanie sits up. "Boo."

The killer makes a grab for her, strength enhanced by the oil-colored armor's internal mechanisms, but Stephanie's already rolled off the side of the bed and landed in a crouch. Jason is tensed, ready to spring, but you rest your hand on his shoulder to keep him still. She'll never learn if she isn't given a chance to make some of her own mistakes.

"You're all wrong," the killer says, making another grab for Stephanie. This time the move is successful, and Stephanie is lifted up by the throat.

"Says you," Stephanie retorts between choked breaths, kicking at the point where the killer's armor plates connect. Jason shrugs your hand off his shoulder and you allow him to creep through the doorway into the bedroom. He'll know when to strike, if at all.

"You're not Robin. You're a woman. Not even that," the killer says. Stephanie bends one knee up close to her chest. "You're not very much more than a little girl."

"A girl who's going to kick your -" Stephanie gasps, striking out at the killer's helmet. The killer gives Stephanie's neck a bone-rattling shake.

"Stop that."

Jason does an easy handspring flip in close behind the two of them, striking down heavily on the arm holding Stephanie. The killer whirls, a zap of electricity arcing between two prongs on its glove as it strikes at Jason. He jumps backwards out of range, sparing a glance for Stephanie as she gulps for air.

"You're not Robin either. Hair could be dyed, but you're too tall."

"I had a growth spurt," Jason retorts, dodging another swipe and hitting the killer's ankle with a well-aimed shuriken. The blade creates a spark-edged crack in the shin plates of the armor.

"Behave, and you'll live through this. I haven't been contracted to kill either of you," the killer says, following Jason across the room. Its voice is flat and electronic, the familiar sounds of a scrambler. Telling who is underneath the armor, or even their gender, is impossible.

"You're after Robin." Stephanie is back on her feet, still gasping. "Well, here we are." There are bruises rising on the skin above her collar. The killer's attention is divided between the two of them.

"What, no banter?" Jason says, shifting his stance enough that the killer has to turn to keep him in view. "What's the point in stalking the Teen Wonder if you don't even bother with the bad jokes?"

"Neither of you are my target. We have no reason to fight." Even through the distortion, the fear in the killer's voice is obvious. Unpredictable foes are more dangerous, and Jason and Stephanie are as unpredictable as summer storms.

"You don't get it." Stephanie's voice is a hiss. "But that's okay. We'll explain."

They pounce in unison, knocking the killer down and aiming for the obvious weak points in the armor. Their suits are insulated against electrical shocks but neither Jason nor Stephanie shows any sign of remembering to protect their face or arms.

If either goes down, you'll enter the fight yourself. For now their respective weaknesses are covered by the other's strengths. Stephanie's punches to the comparatively weak covering on the killer's neck are keeping it distracted enough that Jason is able to pull the pronged glove off its hand.

They are bright and beautiful and vicious and they don't slow their attack as the killer's own strikes become less powerful. You hang back. If you halt them, they will not have to learn to stop themselves. You don't know what you'll do if they do not. They must.

The killer kicks at Jason, the shuriken still embedded in its leg slicing open his arm in a clean diagonal line above the gauntlet. He cries out at the pain and moves as if falling backwards. The killer follows the feint, and Stephanie takes the opportunity to unclasp her cape and throw it over the killer's head and arms before firing her grapple to tie the impromptu net closed.

They grin at each other, battered and victorious. You're loathe to intrude upon their moment of triumph, but it's only a handful of seconds before they both turn to face you.

"One freakazoid assassin, shrinkwrapped for your convenience," Stephanie says.

"Your throat," you say. Without the collar of the cape obscuring it, the number and severity of the bruises is shockingly evident. She makes a face.

"It hurts like hell, but I can breathe okay. Looks like it's turtlenecks for me for a couple of weeks."

"Your arm?" You turn to Jason. He has his palm pressed over the wound.

"Like Robin said, hurts like hell. I probably need a few stitches."

You send the Robins back to the Cave for first aid and make sure that adequate measures are taken to keep the killer incarcerated. Then, after retrieving David Fitch from his hiding place and taking him to the police, you head for home yourself.

Jason's standing in front of the case, looking at it with an expression you can't read. He's still wearing his costume, but has taken off the mask. You push your cowl back.

"It's all right if we keep this the way it is, isn't it?" he asks without turning. "I can see where there used to be a plaque, but I don't want you to put it back. It's better without a name. Robin's dead, long live Robin. You know?"

His shoulders have always fitted in your palms like they were made to be there. Your reflections look watery and uncolored in the glass over the empty uniform.

"How's your arm?" you ask him. He glances down at the bandage.

"It'll be okay. I know how to roll with that kinda knock, so it wasn't that deep."

"Good." You lean in, closing your eyes as you breathe the scent of him.

"You were frightened when I got hurt." It's not a question. Jason tilts his head back to rest against your shoulder.

"Yes."

"You're still frightened. I can tell."

"Yes."

He turns, and wraps his arms around your neck. The feel of the gauntlets on your skin makes you want to shiver. Jason's mouth is hot and hard against yours.

"See?" he says, endless minutes later. "I told you it would be okay."

Eventually, the cut on Jason's arm heals.

It leaves a scar.

GREATEST OF EASE

It's been a lousy day. There are rumours going around that management's being hit up for money by local mobsters, and that kind of thing always makes Jason's parents antsy.

"This is why I hate coming to Gotham," his Mom says, mending a tear in the bodice of her costume. "Doesn't anyone remember what happened to the Graysons?"

Jason sure does. Since before he was old enough to be in the act his parents have been talking about them. They were the best, they were beyond the best, and they got killed for blackmail cash.

"It'll be fine, Trina," Jason's Dad says, resting a hand on her shoulder. Jason watches them and smiles. He loves the way they look after each other.

It's been a lousy day. Usually Tim loves his birthday, because his parents talk to him a lot and go places with him. But the 'Tim aged eleven' mark on the doorframe isn't very much higher than the 'Tim aged ten', and he doesn't really like being told 'you'll shoot up when you hit puberty' twenty times over breakfast.

And now his special birthday outing has turned out to be a trip to the circus. Sometimes Tim worries that his parents are both insane. Most people wouldn't actually forget about that one time when their child witnessed a double murder under the big top.

Tim sits on the bench and tries to keep his face in a happy grin. It feels somewhat convincing.

"AAAAAND NOW, THE DEATH-DEFYING FAMILY TRIO, HERE TODAY TO PERFORM FEATS OF DARING-DO THE LIKES OF WHICH HAVE NEVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE! THE FLYYYING TODDS!"

Tim rolls his eyes, and wishes his parents'd bought him the scanner he asked for.

Jason never gets nervous before a show. It would be like an ordinary person getting scared before they sat down in a chair or something. He's been doing this longer than he's known how to read.

But he feels nervous now. Maybe it was his Mom's mood earlier, or a weird look the guy over near the entrance gave them as they climbed the long ladders up to their perches, or bad mayo on his lunch. Something's wrong.

The show must go on, though, so he swings out and listens to the cheers. The first routine goes off without a hitch, and Jason ignores the concerned look he gets from his Dad. The second routine's perfect.

The third's barely begun before the rope of Jason's trapeze snaps.

Oh, he thinks. I'm falling.

Tim thinks, oh no. Not again. He feels the gasp of air come into his lungs, but he can't hear anything. The world's turned to rushing quiet.

The boy seems to take forever to move through the air. His eyes meet Tim's, their faces mirroring each other's horror and surprise.

Tim doesn't want to watch, but he can't look away.

Using the momentum of his swing, Jason falls nearer and nearer to the pole he clambered up not ten minutes ago. He won't get close enough to crash into it, but maybe he can....

As he hooks his arm around the rung of one of the ladders, he hears the bone snap. The pain doesn't come until he's got a foot planted as well. Then everything pulls back into focus with painful clarity, and he can hear the audience scream.

"It's okay," he says, voice faint and wavering. "I'm okay."

Tim's parent's can't understand why on earth he'd want to spend the evening of his birthday visiting some kid he doesn't even know in hospital, but they

agree eventually. It takes him about three minutes to lose them in the emergency room crowds.

Then it's a matter of lying and bribing and trying to look pitiful, and finding out what ward Jason Todd's in. He's been put upstairs in a private room while his cast sets, because there's no room in the ER. The elevator up to the third level smells like the same cleaning products that're used in the bathrooms at Tim's school.

Jason's room has a high, wide window, opened to a view of the hospital parking lot and the radiology clinic. His cast is a vivid green, which looks odd against the purple of his costume.

"The only other option was plain white," Jason says when he sees Tim looking at his arm. "Hi. I'm Jay. You were at the show."

The boy nods. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Yeah, me too," Jason agrees with a laugh. "I sent my parents down to the gift shop to get me some magazines. They were pacing. It was starting to get annoying."

"Mine are around somewhere. Oh, I'm Tim. Hi,"

"Hiya. So..." Jason leans back against the headboard of the bed, crossing his legs on top of the coverlet. His cast's dried, and whatever that painkiller pill was it's sure working. "What did you think of the show?"

"You're very talented," Tim tells him. "All three of you, but you in particular. Right up there with the Flying Gra-- oh."

Robin gives them both a smile, climbing down from his crouch on the windowsill. "How's that arm?"

Jason grins. "Robin! Wow! Gotham is *cool*!"

Tim hasn't been this close to Robin since he... no, he's never been this close to *Robin*. He swallows and waves one hand in a tiny wave.

"We're trying to find the guys who did this to you. Anything you remember? Anything strange?"

"Um." Tim watches as Jason screws his face up and shakes his head. "Just gossip. About blackmail and stuff. Oh! And there was a guy there who looked strange. But I didn't get a good look at him. Sorry."

Robin nods thoughtfully. "No, that's good. Thanks for your help. Tell your parents I'll catch up with them later."

"kay. This is Tim."

Tim manages not to squeak when Robin gives him a beaming smile. "Hi, Tim."

As soon as Robin's gone, Jason leaps out of bed and leans out the window to watch him go.

"C'mon!" he says to Tim, heading for the door. "Let's follow him!"

"Uh." Tim hesitates. "You've got a broken arm. And you're still in your..." he gestures to Jason's circus costume of tights and leotard.

Jason snorts. "So? It's more than Robin was wearing. C'mon!"

Another second, and then Tim's at his side as they step into the hallway.

"C'mon," says Tim. "The stairs'll be faster than the elevator."

Once he decides to go with Jason, Tim's heart starts racing the same way it does whenever he reads about Robin or sees glimpses on TV. Sometimes he forgets that it's all real, and not just a story he made up and wishes was true. Then he gets reminded, and it makes his palms damp and his pulse thud.

"Hey," Jason says as they reach the parking lot, catching Tim's shoulder with the hand of his good arm. "Is that Batman?"

Tim glances up to the roof of one of the hospital's wings, catching sight of a dark shape moving quickly. "I think so."

"Wow," Jason says softly, looking entranced. "*Batman*. Awesome."

Tim's eye catches a flash of yellow up ahead, and he tugs on Jason's hand. "I think I see Robin."

"Huh?" Jason's still staring at where Batman was.

"C'mon," Tim insists. "You're the one who wanted to, remember?"

"Right, right," Jason says with a nod.

"Do you think Batman knows we're doing this?" Tim's never been sure.

"I think Batman knows *everything*."

"Maybe," concedes Tim. "So... what's the plan when we get to where Robin's going?"

"That's what we'll find out, I guess," Jason tells him with a laugh.

OF A FEATHER

The new digital camera, hanging off its strap on Tim's wrist, makes a noise designed to sound like an old-fashioned shutter whenever a photo is taken. He

thinks this is funny, just as he thinks the ringtone on his mother's phone (the jangle of an antique handset) is funny. People scrabbling to make their new, antiseptic world sound like something gone and real.

His jacket's new, too. Too big, so he can grow into it. His father always buys him clothes a few sizes larger than would make sense, as if he can trick Tim's smallness and slowness into filling out.

It almost never snows on the street-level in Gotham, and tonight is no exception, but up here on the roof of the Crown Hotel the clouds are close enough to send icy flakes drifting on the wind. Tim scuffs at the dirty sludge gathering underfoot with the sole of his sneaker, and looks out at the skyline.

The flicker Robin makes across the spaces between buildings isn't as blinding as it used to be. It comforts Tim to know that this is because the uniform is different now; he'd hate to think that those old reds and golds and greens could dampen simply because he's approaching fifteen now.

He knows the story behind the costume change, of course. He still remembers, with painful clarity, those days: feeling sick in his throat, his blood skittering through his veins and making his hands shake, reading the newspapers every morning online. Praying every time he logged on that there had been a break in the Joker's latest kidnapping scheme.

Then, after almost three weeks, the headline staring back at him in bolded sixteen-point type: *Joker victim found alive.*

From the few hospital records he's been able to find, Tim knows that Jason had a skin graft on one

leg, numerous stitches, ongoing counselling, and a few group therapy sessions. From the newspapers, he knows that Bruce Wayne made generous donations to the police and the hospitals.

And, from nights like this and a succession of top-of-the-line cameras, Tim knows that Robin now wears black boots, green leggings, and a reversible cape with one side bright and the other dark.

Robin lands a few feet away from him, cape furling impressively as he straightens. Tim feels a smirk twitch at his mouth. Batman might do moves like that to intimidate and impress and frighten, but from Robin it always carries the faint scent of a teenage boy being showy for an appreciative audience.

"I haven't seen you around for a few weeks. At first I thought maybe you'd gotten bored, and then I remembered that duh, it's Christmas, you go to your Dad's in Metropolis, right?"

Tim nods. He's more than a little charmed that they keep tabs on him.

"Get anything fun?"

Tim raises his arm. "New camera, from my Mom. She's gone to Bali."

Jason laughs. "You, getting a camera? There's a surprise. But I don't think you'll find much to snap tonight. It's too cold for supervillainy."

"I needed to talk to you."

Tim guesses that his voice sounds troubled, because Jason retracts the lenses on his mask and gives Tim a concerned look. "What's up?"

"My father... at Christmas, I met his girlfriend. They're getting married. It's Natalia."

Jason's face seems to freeze for a moment, blank incomprehension smoothing his features. Then he blinks a few times. "Oh. I didn't know that she was... I'm glad she's alive."

He doesn't ask how Tim knows that he knows Natalia. Robin, Batman, Batgirl and Nightwing have all learned by now to simply be glad that Tim's sneaky omniscience means them no harm.

"I didn't want you to find out from the society pages."

"So she'll be your mom, huh?"

Tim bites back on the automatic *stepmother* response. He knows that the comment speaks more about Jason than it does about the current situation.

He knows, too, that Jason's feelings for Natalia were never so simple as a boy looking for a mother-figure. Tim's never had a chance to read Jason's personal journal, but he's got an ear for picking up things unsaid. He wouldn't be a very good detective if he couldn't even tell when someone's got feelings about someone else.

The fact that Natalia legally adopted Jason would probably give any other benign stalker pause, but Tim knows that Bruce Wayne legally adopted Jason, too.

There is a disc of photos in Tim's stash which, of his collection, would be the least dangerous and most embarrassing to have a parent find. It contains several photos of stolen kisses. If Tim ever felt a desire to become a tabloid photographer, these pictures of Bruce Wayne and Jason Todd would be an express ticket to the big money.

Tim thinks the pictures are nice enough -- the pair of them certainly look like they enjoy each

other's company more than Tim's parents ever did -- but there's only one which draws his eyes back over and over, making his heart thud a little harder in his chest. A blurry, low-resolution, badly-framed photo of Batman and Robin, their bodies lattice-shadowed by an overhanging fire escape, kissing in an alleyway.

"Is she... do you think your Dad's in danger?" Jason asks, pulling himself out of his brooding. Tim shoves his own thoughts aside, and hopes that any flush on his cheeks will be written off as a result of the cold.

"I don't know. I think -" Tim pauses, unsure how to phrase the next sentence delicately. "That she picked someone with a dark-haired son."

Jason blinks hard. Tim knows what kind of dye he uses to keep his hair Robin-black.

"Do you think *you're* in danger, then?"

"I don't know. I wanted to let you know. So that you could -"

"- keep an eye on you," Jason finishes for him, nodding. "Of course. I can ask Batman to give you a beeper, or a secure phone, if you want. And you can even keep 'em as souvenirs when this blows over."

Worried as he is, that's enough to make Tim smile broadly. "Thanks."

"Come back with me now, we'll get you set up. I'm catching the train back to the inner city."

Tim rolls his eyes. "I'm *not* catching the train with you, Robin. I learned that lesson last time."

Jason grins. "Hey, you didn't fall off, did you? You're still in one piece."

"No."

"City kids are supposed to get lungfuls of fresh wind from time to time. Keeps us healthy."

"No." Tim folds his arms across his chest. "I'm pretty sure that offering to protect me from a possibly-evil stepmother means that you're not allowed to take me on top of any fast-moving public transport in the meantime."

"You'd be perfectly safe!" Jason teases. "Okay, okay, you can buy a ticket and ride in the carriage and everything. But I bet I have more fun."

"I have plenty fun."

"Well, at least let me get us down to street level." Jason wraps an arm around Tim's waist. "You sure are skinny."

"Wait, what're -" Tim manages to get out before Jason fires his grapple off and sends them swinging down. "*Robin!*"

Jason just laughs. Tim clings on, and lets himself fly.

**THE VERY TRUE STORY OF BATMAN'S
GIRLFRIEND AND THE DAY SHE ARGUED WITH HER
HAUNTED HAIR DYE ABOUT LEOPARD SPOTS**

She's been sleeping in Bruce's narrow bed, curled against him in a way she feels like she was built for, for almost two months now. In another week she's going to be sixteen.

Her hair is still unfamiliar. Bruce seems to like it. His hand feels huge as he runs it over the coarse bleached fuzz above her brow. Soldier's hair, Carrie thinks to herself, and smiles a little.

The cowlick she'd had since she was small always felt wrong, ever since she first put on the suit. Robin should be able to wear a double-curl, and she never could. And even not having the curls would've been okay, if it hadn't been so *red*. That's her father's fault. His beard was big and bushy and as bright as his only daughter's hair turned out. She freckles, too. Big penny-splotches on her face. Or would, if she saw the sun very often. The city's always the night-Gotham when she visits it, but Carrie figures that's closer to the real soul of the city anyway.

She'd been idly sorting through the rubble of the Manor, as she often does when bored and energised, when she'd come across the box. It was more than a little bent, and water-damaged in one corner, but the cardboard still had faded traces of old, bright printing on it. A hair dye packet, color #002: Obsidian Dream.

It looked like it was about a zillion years old, but Carrie couldn't see how hair dye could *expire* or anything like that, so she'd kicked all the Batboys out of the showers, locked the door, and lathered her hair up.

Twenty acidic-smelling minutes later, she washed the dye out, and yelped in surprise. Her hair was well and truly colored.

A deep emerald green.

"You didn't seriously think that was a smart idea, did you?" a voice behind her asked. Carrie looked up at the mirror and yelped for the second time in as many minutes. There was a boy standing there, and no way was it one of the Batboys. No, with slim shoulders, a yellow cape, and that enviable double

curl, he couldn't be anybody but Robin. "I mean, come *on*."

"You were haunting *product*?" she shot back, turning to look at him properly. He was slightly transparent, only enough to notice if you looked really hard. The tiles behind him showed through like after-images from a flash.

Robin shook his head. "I just didn't have any reason to talk to you before now. You were doing fine on your own."

"Well, I'm doing fine now, so buzz off," Carrie snapped and turned back to the mirror. "It was your stupid dye that got me into this, wasn't it? Bruce told me you were blond."

"Honey, I wouldn't have used dye that old. You got yourself into this."

"Go *away*. I don't need supernatural advice about my hair."

Robin snorted. "You look like the Joker. Can't you at least let me tell you what I'd use to strip the color back to your original shade? It's not a permanent. Or it wasn't a decade and a half ago. I don't know about now."

"No. I'm fine," she'd growled, and with a final, infuriating grin he'd disappeared.

In the end, she'd bleached her hair white, and buzzed it down into a skullcap. It made her look older than she had before, highlighted the plumpness coming into her lower lip and the angles of her cheekbones. She hated it, but it was too late to fix it.

She's growing up. Her face looks like a young woman's, now. Her body's growing soft and curved,

no matter how many turns she takes on the bench press and the rings. Her breasts are...

There were enough aging female hippies among the adults populating Carrie's childhood for her to understand the importance of a good bra. She was a late bloomer, nearly fourteen before she even needed a double-A, but she didn't hesitate to support and bind. She told herself it was so she didn't end up all saggy, but really it was the costume. She needs to look right in it. It's what makes everything else make sense.

She's getting too big to tape down, and it terrifies her.

It shouldn't. She knows it shouldn't. She doesn't wear the costume in bed with Bruce, after all. (Though she knows she would, if he ever asked her to.) She usually just wears sweats and sneakers to train the Batboys. But, through all that, she always knows she *could* be in the costume. That it's hanging in her closet, waiting for her.

It's hers. But maybe she isn't its, anymore.

Unable to sleep, she paces the darkened cavern. The stream burbles off to the left, unseen, and the faint farting and snoring of the boys' dorm area counterpoints it.

With a sigh, Carrie heads for the bathroom.

Robin's leaning against the wall, smirking at her.

"You're like Moaning Myrtle," she says, feeling cranky. He looks confused. "Never mind. After your time. Hi. I'm Carrie."

"Jay. Your hair looks cool. You can pull it off. Most people couldn't."

Carrie makes a face. "Whatever."

"You're kinda surly. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"No." She scowls, then gives a small smile. "They're mostly too scared to."

"I can believe that. So what brings you back to the land of the dead? Going to try a bikini wax this time? Because if so, warn me so I can leave before the show begins."

She wonders if Bruce knows he's here. Probably not. He would've said something.

Her own personal ghost. It'd be cool, if he wasn't so annoying.

"I don't think I'm meant to be Robin anymore," she says in a rush, and then bites on her lip. Her voice sounds scared and weak and young, and she feels like a total baby. Jay just scratches an eyebrow and gives her a long look.

"Yeah, you're getting --" he makes a shaping gesture at his chest, as if there are two basketballs attached to his tunic. "So who're you gonna be?"

"You... you don't think this is a big deal?" To her, it feels like the end of the world.

"Well, you needed Robin before because it's a shortcut to maturity. But now you *are* mature, so..." he shrugs. "No need anymore."

He sounds so sure of himself that she feels oddly comforted. "I guess."

"You could be Batgirl."

Carrie shakes her head. "I don't think I could be a Bat. That feels like a guy thing. Robin's sort of neither, but if I have to quit being Robin because I'm turning into a girl, I might as well be a girl. Does that make sense?"

Jay nods. "Yeah. What about Black Canary?"

"After what happened with the dye? No. No more colors. Even in my name."

"Hmmm." Jay taps his chin with one forefinger. "I'd say Catwoman, but you're not quite a woman yet. She set the bar pretty high for what it takes to wear that title. Never liked her, myself, but she could work stiletto ankle boots like nobody's business."

"Could I be Catgirl? Work my way up?"

"Maybe, maybe. Would you go for purple or black in your costume?"

"I could..." Carrie can feel her eyes widen as ideas tumble through her brain. "Spots. Like leopard print, you know --"

"Honey, no. No no no."

"-- and whiskers! And rollerblades."

Jay looks like he's about to become solid just so he can slap her. "Bruce feeds you drugs, right? He's gone crazy and he feeds you drugs."

"No, trust me! I can see it now!" Carrie nods enthusiastically. "Big furry ears. Yellow for the tights and the top, with black spots."

Jay tries to rest a hand on her shoulder. It feels like a faint draft of air. "You're going to look like a mental patient."

She'd say something about the green scale-mail leotard he's got on under his tunic, but she never says anything bad about the Robin costume. It's the only thing that's ever felt like home for her. Could another costume ever replace that?

"Oh, please. Like Batman's a fashion plate," she settles for saying. Jay tilts his head to one side, as if allowing the point.

"When you come to your senses, come back and we'll work out something sane, okay?"

Carrie grins. "You've got nothing better to do with your afterlife?"

"Nah. Everyone's all depressed and boring."

"See you around, Robin."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't, R... Catgirl. And re-think the whiskers. I beg you."

She waves goodbye to Jay, and goes to wake up Bruce. He has to help her design her new shoes.

DARK NIGHT

All Dick says in reply to that is "Tim," and Tim remembers what some of the dreams are like, and doesn't feel so smug anymore.

"I'm sorry, Dick. I couldn't make you understand any other way." He pinches the bridge of his nose and draws in a deep breath. "I got a message from Jason just a little while ago. The Society's finished their mission, and he'll be back in the city this afternoon. So with him here, and Bruce due back in a few days, I was thinking that Gotham's going to have all the protection it needs, and that maybe I could convince my parents that I've been given a science scholarship to study for a few months in New York..." The deep breath runs out, so Tim stops talking.

"But if both of us are getting these nightmares when we're near her, what's to say Jason won't?"

"I don't know what else to do. Stephanie -- that's, um, the Spoiler, I mean -- has gone to stay with friends in another state until this fades, too. You've only had one night and you know you can't handle another; we've had weeks of this."

Before Carrie left her home, they planned for every eventuality she might have to face.

Or, at least, they figured that they did. "This is what you'll have to do if the Joker's in power", "This will be the plan if Superman's working for the Soviets", "If Green Lantern has gone bad, you'll react this way".

No matter how much worse the world was, she'd handle it.

Too bad they never worked out what she should do if it turned out to be better.

The hardest part of it is Robin. In her life, Robin has always been a part of her, a name for the legacy she threw herself headlong into. But she's never had to face someone else who took that name as theirs and wrapped themselves in its colours.

She doesn't know how to react to Tim, who trains in the Cave until dinnertime after school and then changes back into his ordinary clothes, grumbling about how his parents always want to take him out for dinner when they're in town.

She doesn't know how to respond to Dick, the name that means 'estranged enigma' in her world. A police officer with a politician wife sounds so ordinary and... *real*, as if there's as much value in his daylight hours as in his nights in the air.

And she doesn't know what to make of Jason's image in the photographs on the wall. That name has meant 'good soldier' and 'the cost our side must pay in this war' for her, not a young man with reddish-blond hair and a happy grin.

He looks so at ease, standing with his arm around Bruce's waist, waving to whoever took the photo.

Tim, most likely. And Bruce looks like he's content, too, with his arm stretched across Jason's shoulders.

Carrie sometimes imagined Bruce's arm across her shoulders, just like that. But those day-dreams never had such smiles in them, and she's glad of that difference. If the Bruce in the photographs looked anything more like the Batman she left behind, she figures that her heart might break.

"You're Carrie, right?"

She looks up from her book and nods, pushing her glasses up her nose. Jason's leaning on the doorframe, looking like one of those people who'd be comfortable anywhere. Carrie can't really remember what being at ease felt like.

"I'm Jay. Or Red Hood, if you want to get all formal about it."

She wants to name herself. She hasn't done so since the first night of explanations. Back when Tim thought she was fascinating, before he knew she was a conduit for bad dreams. Everyone's just called her 'Carrie' or 'young lady'.

"I'm Robin," she says now, softly, and Jason's smile gets wider.

"Cool. Too bad we don't have a secret handshake or anything."

"Yeah." She feels bad for him. Tomorrow, after he's had the dreams, he won't want to have anything to do with her. He'll probably regret being so nice to her now.

"I should get back to reading," she says.

"No, wait. Come down to the Cave. I haven't had a proper workout in two and a half weeks, and my

bones are aching for it. We can talk more while we warm up."

"No, really, I should -"

"I know about the dreams. Tim told me. It's okay."

She knows he'll feel different tomorrow, but shrugs anyway. "Whatever."

Even though the Cave in Carrie's world is now playing home to a ragtag army-in-training, the one here feels more crowded when empty than the one at home ever did or could when full.

This is a home.

"What do you do?" Carrie asks as they reach the bottom of the stairs and head for the practise mats. "I mean, um, do you have a job, like Dick?"

"I teach dance, tap, and kiddie gymnastics a couple of afternoons a week."

"Oh, right. Checking for potential Robins. I get it," Carrie says distractedly, gaze caught on the robot dinosaur. She'll never completely get used to all of Bruce's giant trophies.

When Jason doesn't answer, she glances over. He's giving her a slightly puzzled look.

"No, just teaching them fun things."

"Oh." She feels herself blush a little, and talks more to cover her embarrassment. "Kids tap dancing always makes me think of Shirley Temple movies. *A Little Princess*."

"I like that one too. She gets to wear some great little outfits. And there's that fantastic dream sequence about the witch and the ballerinas."

"I used to watch it when I was a kid. My parents used the teevee as a babysitter. I used to," Carrie

smiles sadly at the memory, looking down at her feet. "I used to pretend I was her. The tape we had of the movie was colourised, and her hair was this awful brassy red, so I thought she looked just like me. That I looked just like her. I wanted velvet dresses, and tap shoes, and most of all I wanted a Dad who'd tell me..." She blinks, hard. She's *not* going to cry, not in front of this man who has everything she didn't even know she wanted. But the tears don't care if she wants to cry or not, and start falling anyway. "...that I was a good soldier."

She covers her face with her hands and begins to sob.

Jason grabs her in a hug, and that just makes her cry harder because she's always known, down in that part of her that told her she was Robin, that Robin should be a hugger.

"Let it out. It's okay," Jason says, stroking her hair. "Hey, I like this 'do. What products are you using?"

It's random enough to make her laugh, her face all damp and blotchy against his shoulder.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I'd be freaking in your position, too," Jason assures her. "Now, come on, get changed into sweats, and we'll make up a dance."

"Huh?"

"No, trust me, it's fun. We'll make up a dance. Stupidity and endorphins are a potent mix."

She's got nothing better to do. Maybe it won't be so bad. And he'll hate her tomorrow either way, so she might as well take friendship when she can. "Okay..."

Three hours later, breathless and laughing, Carrie wants to beg Jason for just a few more minutes. But the sun's almost down, and so it's time for things to go back to normal. He'll go out and fight crime, and then come back and have the nightmares.

"We need a name for it," Jason declares, pouring his water bottle over his head and then rubbing his hair with a towel. Carrie's sure that this technique isn't listed in any hairstylist's manual. "The Batdance?"

"The *Batusi*."

"Hey, I like it." Jason grins. "It's got a ring to it. The Batusi it is. Do you wanna come out tonight? It's been a while since I hung out with Robin; Tim likes to patrol on his own."

Maybe this Gotham will make the same twisted kind of sense that hers always did. But maybe it won't, and the disappointment will be more than she can bear.

"No, I'm fine."

"C'mon. It'll be a blast."

She feels like such a sucker, falling for a smile and a nice word, but it's been a long and lonely two weeks.

When they get back, Carrie is bruised and sore and aching.

She dances the goofy dance they made up around her room, and hums to herself, and pretends that she's not going to close her eyes and see terrible things.

Next time she sees Jason, he's not going to want to have anything to do with her.

She sits against the wall, staring at the bed she's been sleeping in. Maybe she could stay awake for the night. Just for tonight, just so she has one more day of a friend.

Her eyes are heavy, even as her blood thrums with energy. She figures that she just needs to rest them for a minute. Then she'll be okay. She'll stay up, and the nightmares will stay at bay.

As her eyelids slip closed, Carrie can feel tears prickle at the corners of them. There's nobody left to tell her she's a good soldier, and she's so tired of fighting.

The nightmares come, and drag her down into the dark.

KITCHEN SINK

1. March

Jason keeps to himself for the first few weeks. He doesn't talk all that often, or cry, or show much sign at all of what he's feeling. When he sits, he's very still, and when he moves he does so like his joints are stiff and sore.

After Dick's own parents died, when he first got to the manor, he couldn't have sat on a couch without wriggling if his life depended on it. His energy had been frightening. He'd felt like the universe would cave in on him if he remained in one place for more than a few seconds at a time. But Jason just sits.

The costume the kid took from the Batcave is folded neatly on the top shelf of Dick's cupboard. Neither of them have mentioned it.

If Dick hadn't already started to feel like maybe he'd outgrown Robin, he would now.

After an almost silent dinner one night, on the Wednesday of the third week, Dick is washing up when Jason comes into the kitchenette and picks up a dishcloth.

"I don't want you to be my dad," he says firmly, in the voice of someone who has planned the words out in advance. He doesn't look at Dick, instead concentrating on wiping a glass dry. "Or my big brother, or a young uncle, or... you don't have to be my family, okay? I appreciate that you took me in. I do. But don't... they're still my parents even if they're dead, got it?"

Dick nods, and reaches out to touch Jason's shoulder. "Got it."

He feels much smaller in Dick's arms than he did when he was wearing the costume.

2. April

After that, things are easier. Jason relaxes enough that Dick begins to get to know him properly. He likes sci-fi movies, and seems to delight in the clunky old serials that get shown on TV late at night.

They talk about their parents, sometimes, but more often their conversations find their way to the circus. It's nice to talk to someone who knows what that rush of performing can feel like; the smells and the intrigue and the way ordinary people seem exotic and weird beside the extended family of the big top. There's only been one other thing in the world that Dick's ever heard of which can match it, and that's Robin.

A month later, on another Wednesday, Dick is doing drying duty when he clears his throat, puts a fork in the drawer, and says "You ever think you might want to do the stuff I do?"

Jason appears to think about it for a moment, then shrugs. "Sure. Of course. I just figured you'd want me to get a handle on school and stuff before you asked me. Mom and Dad only let me perform if I was pulling in at least Bs, and I'm hardly at Cs right now."

"Maybe having more in your life would help you with school. A healthy balance."

"What would my name be? Robin and Jay sounds kind of cool, but it wouldn't be all that secret." Jason hands him another plate to dry. "There aren't that many birds with good names. Wait, I know." He gives Dick a wicked grin. "Swallow. I want my name to be Swallow."

Dick swats at his head with the tea-towel. "Grow up."

"It'll be even funnier when you're older and you change your title to 'the Man Wonder'. We'll get a whole new kind of fanmail, you wait and see."

"I was actually thinking that you could be Robin. If you wanted," Dick says, and forces himself not to hold his breath. He hasn't told anyone about his plans before.

Jason turns, the sink of soapy water forgotten. "Really? Who are you gonna be, then?"

"I was thinking 'Nightwing'."

"Hmm." Jason cocks his head to one side, like an antiques appraiser. "That's workable. Got a costume in mind?"

"Not yet."

"Can I help?"

"With the costume?"

"Yeah!" Jason's eyes light up. "It should be blue, I think. Not too dark. Maybe accents in a contrasting shade. Do you have a strong opinion on necklines? Hey, should I leave my hair like it is, or dye it? Would Robin look okay as a blond? I can't really picture it, but that doesn't automatically mean it's not a good idea."

Sudden visions of Jason and Bette forcing all the Titans to submit to makeovers dance through Dick's brain. They're disturbingly plausible.

"Uh," he says. "Yes to blue, no to necklines, have your hair however you like. I think bystanders will twig what's happened when they see us side by side anyway."

Jason grins broadly. "Nightwing and Robin. Now *that* sounds great."

3. August

"What do you think of Tara?" Dick asks, putting the first of the night's dishes into the sink.

Jason looks up from his homework, strewn across the dining table. "Want me to dry?"

"No, it's cool, you keep at that. She's a nice kid, don't you think?"

"Um, Dick, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but I'm not much for the womenfolk." Jason smirks, then mimes thoughtfully stroking a beard. "Which is not to say that I would recoil in horror if Kory ever wanted to learn French really fast."

Dick rolls his eyes. "I didn't mean like that, twerp. I just thought that maybe now you've spent

some time around my team you might have a feeling about them. She's closer to your age than mine."

"She seems friendly, I guess. We didn't talk much. Why?"

Dick shakes his head. "It's probably nothing. Nevermind. How's the geometry?"

"Stupid."

"No, I was asking about the geometry, not you."

"You're hilarious, Man Wonder."

"Only compared to your pathetic jokes, Little Wing."

4. November

"Cocoa?" Dick asks, getting down two mugs without waiting for the answer. It's a rare pizza night, so washing up consisted of putting the box in the garbage with the greasy napkins they used as plates.

Jason has balanced a chair on its front left foot, and it currently easing himself up into a handstand on the righthand tip of the backrest.

"If you kill the linoleum, you're paying for it."

"It's evil linoleum, it must be vanquished," Jason says distractedly, bare feet brushing the ceiling.

"Don't kick the light fixture. It's beside your ankle," Dick warns as he puts the kettle on.

"Did you have a crush on Batman when you were my age?"

"Why do you ask?"

Against all logic, Jason manages to shrug without disrupting his balance. "Just wondering. Because I'm made up of all these parts of stuff which used to be other people, you know? Some of me's the old Jason, obviously, but I'm someone else to who he

was. And some of me's from my Mom and from my Dad, and some of it's your lousy influence over my recent upbringing, and a whole bunch of it is Robin. And Robin -" Jason shifts his weight onto his other hand and scratches his ear. "Was you before he was me. And I want to know if it's a Robin thing or a Jason thing."

"You have a crush on Batman?"

"Didn't you? I mean, you *lived* with the guy, and I only see him when we're all teamed up."

"You live with me. Doesn't mean you've got a crush on me."

Jason looks at Dick and waggles his eyebrows. Since he's upside down, the effect is ridiculously creepy. "Don't I?"

Dick decides his time is better spent pouring out their drinks than it would be responding to that. "C'mon, get down, I'm not letting you drink hot liquid out of a mug while you're upside-down. I hear social services frowns on that."

Jason folds himself down until his feet are back on the floor. There's a toe-shaped smudge on the ceiling. "You didn't answer my question."

Dick sighs. "Just drink your cocoa." One of these days, he's going to start putting tranquilizers in it.

5. March

Dick can't remember ever seeing Jason in the Robin uniform in this part of the apartment. He looks out-of-place, like a bad special effect in a film. The Jason Dick is used to seeing by the kitchen window isn't one in a mask and a cape.

"The sky's so many different colours," Jason says quietly, sensing the Dick's come into the room. "It's

like a sunset, only a million times more. The sunset of a whole world, not just one day."

Dick, now standing close, squeezes Jason's shoulder. "Hey, don't. Thoughts like that are reserved for Bruce, you hear me?"

Jason gives him a half-hearted smile before turning back to the window. "Yeah, fine. No sense in greeting the end of the world with a *frown* or anything."

"Jay. Things will be okay." He's heard what people are saying. The word 'crisis' is gaining rapid popularity. But he still says the words to Jason like he believes them. "We'll be all right. And if we're not, well, that's that I guess. Hey, I tell you what: When this is done, we'll redesign our costumes. You're always bitching that I don't wear the collar like I mean it. There's something to look forward to."

Jason takes a deep breath, his throat sounding a little closed up. "My parents were gonna name me Richard, y'know. Mom's water broke near the lion cage and I was born right there, and so Dad said I was lionhearted. But they really liked Greek myths, so they went with Jason instead. If I was a girl, I was gonna be Ariadne."

"Would've made things confusing for us both if you'd been a Richard, wouldn't it? An identity crisis."

Jason laughs a little, and leans against Dick. "I'm scared."

"Me too."

"I hear it's more comforting to answer 'don't be', or 'things will turn out fine', you know."

Dick gives him a light mock-smack to the side of the head. "I said that already. You ignored me, as usual."

"Why break a pattern that works?" Jason asks, deadpan, and gives Dick a real -- if slightly wobbly -- smile. "C'mon, Nightwing. Let's go save the world."

"Right beside you, Robin."

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Dear Sir/Madam;

I'm sorry to start this so formally, but I'm not sure there's any other option. Thank you for adopting my child. I hope you love her very much. I don't know why, but I'm almost certain it is a her. Whether that's the truth or not, thank you.

I don't want to write to her directly, though you can give her this letter on her sixteenth birthday if you think that's appropriate. That's how old I am now, and it feels very strange to think that the bump in my belly will ever be a person just like me. You don't have to give it to her if you don't want to. You can ignore this if you like. Make something better up.

My name is Lorena Hearst, but everybody's always called me Rena. I was named after a grandmother who wasn't very well liked by the rest of the family, so I figure they shortened my name so I wouldn't inherit the baggage that came with being called that. I have brown hair, grey eyes, and wide palms. The baby's father had blond hair, blue eyes, and long legs. Maybe you'll want to look and see if

the baby has any of those things too, that's why I'm mentioning them. I'm okay at school. I think I'd like to be a marine biologist one day, but my Dad says that all the girls who don't want to be flight attendants say that.

I don't want you to think that I'm some nice kid who got a bad break, or anything like that. If things hadn't gone horrible, I would've had an abortion.

Bet you don't feel sorry for me now. I bet you've put the letter back in the envelope, or you're burning it. No way you're going to let the baby read it when she grows up.

Sometimes I imagine how it should've gone, when I feel sick or ugly and the baby starts kicking me. I'd have had a termination, and the baby's father would've found out, and we'd have ended up breaking up after that. I'd be thinking about normal stuff, and using this paper to write to penfriends.

Your daughter's father was named Jason. We met at school, because we were the two newest kids in the class. He was nice, if a bit googly-moogly. I never got before what my Mom meant when she'd say that her sister Sally was in love with the idea of love, but that was what Jase could be like sometimes. I felt like he loved me because he had to love somebody, and I happened to be nearby.

It was hard not to love him back, at least a little bit. He was persistent.

It was all a total cliché: boy meets girl, boy and girl start going out, stuff happens, the test turns pink.

The difference with us was that by the time I took a test, Jason was dead.

He got killed by the Joker. I hope to God that the Joker's dead by the time you're reading this. Sometimes I think that maybe, once the baby's born, I'm going to get one of my Dad's guns and go up to Arkham with it. Someone needs to stop him.

The paper even mentioned the killing, which is how I knew it must have been really bad. The Joker kills so many people that most of them barely get to be a name on a list in the middle of an article, but Jason got two whole paragraphs about how it was so tragic that someone so young had been brutally slain by a madman.

When I can't sleep, it's because I'm thinking about that. I don't want to, but the second I shut my eyes I start imagining how it must have been for him before it was over. I know it doesn't do any good to wonder, but I can't stop. I don't sleep very much. I hope it isn't hurting the baby. I hope the baby can sleep well.

A few weeks after, I found out that I was pregnant. I couldn't get rid of it. Same as how I didn't give his soccer shirt back to Mr Wayne when I found that it'd ended up in my laundry, I guess. It was a little part of Jase that I still had, even though the rest of him was gone.

I gave Mr Wayne the rest of the stuff of Jason's I had. A camera with half a roll of film still in it. I could have had the pictures developed, but I didn't want to. It's like that experiment with the cat in the box, where until the box is opened nobody knows if the cat's alive or dead. Until the pictures were printed, the moment wasn't really set down. It wasn't passed yet. I couldn't do it. I don't know if Mr Wayne could.

I think Jason loved him the same way he loved me. We never talked about it, but I can't imagine Jason having any other way of loving someone apart from with his whole entire soul. I'll lie to get people to like me, or do dumb things, but Jason just laid himself open and offered it up. I stole that line from one of my Mom's romance novels. It was talking about the girl character, and I think it was phrased like that because it was one of those books where all the smutty bits are metaphors. But it wasn't a metaphor with Jason.

By the time I went to see Mr Wayne, I was starting to show a little. He asked if I wanted money. I said yeah. He never asked if the baby was Jason's. I don't know if that means he assumed it was, or if it didn't matter either way.

The other stuff I gave back to Mr Wayne was all junky: a necklace with a fanged tooth on it, a couple of half-filled school notebooks, a magazine Jase had bought for me. It had a picture of Robin in it. Jason didn't like that I had a crush on another guy, but I guess the fact that it was a superhero made it easier for him to put up with it. Some girls like rock stars.

I'm saying all this because I want my daughter -- your daughter, now -- to know that she might have been an accident, but she was kept and carried with love. All I could give Jase, by the time I knew, was to keep it. He would have loved you so much, little girl. I can feel you kicking, and I know that. He would have loved you to the end of the world. It's who he was.

I guess I do hope that you end up reading this for yourself one day. I don't think we're ever going to meet. I feel like there's another thing growing inside

me, along with you. It's the thing that makes me want to borrow my Dad's guns and find the Joker. I don't think it's going to stop, and I know that some kinds of heroes don't live all that long. Even Robin hasn't been seen for a while.

I hope you don't hate me. I hope you have a name that's yours, and not just one you got handed down to you from someone else. I've always kind of liked the name Caroline, but it's not really up to me.

Whoever you are, know that you're loved.

Yours sincerely,

Rena

CONVERSATIONS WITH DEAD PEOPLE: FIVE THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED TO JASON TODD

ONE

Jason's never wanted to be a crook, not like the boys in this school are gonna be. He just does what he has to, and so he's nearly out the window before he realises something. The Batman. The Batman put him here, and the Batman's no idiot. He must've known what this place was. What was it that he'd said to Jason? *Learn something*. He's trusting Jason to bring this racket down.

Jason doesn't climb out the window.

Six months later Jason knows what kinda guns it's easiest to get on Crime Alley and where to get them, seven different techniques for ripping off department stores without tripping alarms, and (this, he had to teach himself) how to look like he's

drinking as much as those around him without having more than a mouthful. He's also aided in way more heists than he wants to think about, but that's the price he pays. Robin Hood had to learn how to rob the rich before he gave to the poor.

When Benny gets shot knocking over a liquor store, Jason decides he's learned enough. Benny's okay, in a big dumb way. Ma Gunn's grooming him to be one of those mob henchmen types. Jason, she's grooming into just what he's made everyone think he's gonna be: a two-bit hoodlum. Kids like Jason are the ones who go down on easy jobs, not kids like Benny.

Jason and the other guys rush him to a clinic and try to help him, but all the doctor can really do is dope him up so he doesn't feel more pain.

Jason knows it's time to get rid of school when he sees the doctor's grim, sad, accepting face. Jason isn't ever gonna let any kid die like Benny again, with some old lady looking down like hey, shit happens, these kids are doomed and that's that. It isn't going to happen again if Jason can possibly help it.

He can't call in the cops, because every boy at the school has done enough to get them sent down a dozen times over. Jason isn't gonna land himself in juvie just to see Ma Gunn get hers.

He weighs his options. Explores the gross-smelling brownstone where they all live from top to bottom and memorises all the sleeping-places and exits. Steals enough of Ma Gunn's papers to know where the money is and where it could be if he moves fast.

It all happens in one night, because Jason knows he won't have a chance to get it all done with any more time than that for things to go wrong in. Some rags, some gasoline, and his lighter, and the house is full of deadly-looking but relatively controlled flames. First step done with. Second step is to get all the kids out, every last one of them. Jason's picked out the three guys he thinks are the most reliable and puts them in charge of seeing that everyone's okay.

Then he goes back inside and finds Ma Gunn just where he expected her, bent over that steamer trunk full of big glittery jewels and chunks of gold and silver. Jason knocks her out with a whack to the back of her head, fills his pockets with the most expensive-looking stuff, and drags her out the back door.

He dumps her outside the police station with a letter pinned to her dress listing all the stuff she's done. He's put Benny's death at the top of the page.

Jason hasn't really thought as much about the next step. There are enough condemned buildings around that a place to sleep isn't a problem, but some of the kids from the school are still way too young to look after themselves.

Jason tells his three chosen helpers to make sure nobody's hurt or hungry, and keep them all together on their way to finding a place for the night. Nobody notices that Ma Gunn's not around, and nobody sleeps much after the excitement of the fire. Jason paces, and tries to decide what the best thing to do is.

Then he remembers Millie, who sometimes helped him with his Mom when things were really

bad. Millie's just another odd-jobber now, but Jason remembers her saying once that she used to help out with her husband's eighth-grade class back before he died. She'd have more of an idea what to do than Jason does.

He reaches the room she rents just as daylight starts to clean the Alley up a bit. Millie's got a problem with junk, same as Jason's Mom did, but seemed alert enough when she answers the door.

She greets him, obviously pleased that he hasn't gotten himself dead or missing. He tells her as much about what's going on as he feels he can, and begs for her to help him. Jason hates begging, but he'll do it when he has to.

She's reluctant, and Jason can feel the weight of the loot in his pocket. He won't buy her help, because if he had to pay then it wouldn't be worth anything.

I'll look after you, too. Like I'm looking after the kids, Jason says. *Lemme look after you like I didn't know how to look after Mom.* Like I didn't know how to look after Benny, he adds silently to himself.

Something sad and tired and bright flares in Millie's eyes when Jason says that, and after a second he realises that it might just be hope. Jason's never made anybody hopeful before. He likes how it feels.

The notebooks and pencils are cheap enough, and Millie's still got a bunch of her husband's old textbooks. For the first couple of days the kids are confused by lessons about real school stuff, but Jason buys them better food than Ma Gunn did and so they're willing to do what he tells them.

Jason tries to pay attention too, but can't concentrate, can't sit still for long enough. With Millie and some helpers keeping things running, Jason starts sleeping late and going out at night. Pimps and Johns learn quickly that roughing their girls up will earn them a couple of hits from a tire iron or half a brick. The women try to give Jason money, out of gratitude and a hope for continued protection, but he doesn't take it. Ma Gunn's savings are weighty enough that Jason's got no fear of poverty for himself or those he looks after.

Sometimes the women and girls and boys try to thank Jason other ways, but he turns them down too. He wants to look after them, not earn favours.

When he goes to bed, Jason pretends to be talking to Benny. They were never all that close, and Jason can't really remember what he was like all that clearly, but it's better than pretending to talk to himself. He just says random stuff, about his day and what kind of soda he wants a bottle of and how he never knew kids grew out of clothes so fast.

He learns the rhythm and hierarchies of the street better than ever before. The crime and the hooking's as bad as it is because there's no other way for people to earn the cash they need to survive. On Jason's fifteenth birthday he uses most of the assets he took from Ma Gunn to buy the old shoe factory on the corner of Wilson and Dunleavy streets. It's a gamble, but he trusts his gut.

A couple of weeks later he's out walking, trying to forget all the stuff he's got to worry about (some of the kids have chicken pox, there's a new gun supplier working the area, winter's coming and there's too many people with nowhere warm to go).

It's one of those weird twists of fate that makes him run into a lady who knew his family before things went bad. She's got a box of their stuff at her apartment, photos and papers and things and Jason doesn't know whether to laugh or cry at the gift.

He takes it back to the building where he's still staying and unpacks each treasure in turn. He remembers the day they got their portrait taken, the way his Dad complained about his itchy suit. Jason's old report cards all say he doesn't play well with others. A couple of letters from an aunt who died long ago, and then Jason finds his birth certificate.

Once the initial shock of seeing that the water-blurred name on the 'mother' line is not Catherine Todd has worn off, Jason lets himself slip into planning mode. Public records are easy enough to obtain, and he's got enough diamond rings left over from Ma Gunn to get a few extra favours.

It's not about having a Mom. Not really. Jason feels too old by half to need parents anymore. It's a mystery, a distraction. A link between him and a world outside his responsibilities. It's also almost like how he still sometimes talks to Benny in his head. Something that he needs and isn't sure why.

It's not long before he gets the answers to his questions. Sheila Haywood left the country after a back-alley abortion on a teenage girl went wrong and ended with the patient dead. Currently, Sheila's working with famine relief efforts in Africa.

Jason sits and looks at the words and blinks and breathes. It feels like a betrayal of Catherine, the woman he still thinks of as 'Mom' in his head, for him to be so proud of this other person he doesn't even know. She's doing what she can to fix the

world, and doesn't stop even when the going gets shitty.

He writes her a short note, unsure if she's be happy to know that he knows about her past. Just *Hi, my name's Jason Todd, I'd really like to hear back from you, here's a photo of me now.*

A month goes by. Two, three. The factory's doing okay but more importantly the streets are little safer. With legitimate jobs and steady incomes, people are getting on track. Underworld guys have started propositioning Jason with business partnerships and threats disguised as bribes. He's not scared of them. He still goes out at night, but most of the locals know better than to get on his bad side by now.

One day there's a letter for him at the post office. *Jason, my god, it's such a surprise (a happy surprise, I assure you!) to get a letter from you. You look the spitting image of my father. I wish I still had a photograph of him at your age so I could prove it. He was a police officer. Your grandmother was a legal secretary. They died when I was very young, and I would never wish such heartache on anyone else. I suspect that this is why I never fought to keep you - I fear I lack the maternal instincts all children deserve. I am sorry for any hurt I caused you, Jason. Perhaps some day we can meet one another. S.H.*

Jason keeps meaning to write back, but there's always something else that needs doing and he never gets around to it. It's almost a year after the fact before he hears of her death, and another three months more before his sources tell him that she was skimming a sizeable amount from the budget of the relief aid. Jason hates that he'll never be able to

ask her why, but has no doubt that she had a good reason. He couldn't be doing all that he is without the dirty money he started off with, after all. People have all kinds of reasons for things.

The school gets a real building and real books and an actual dormitory with heat and running water. The shoe factory's doing well enough that Jason branches out into his first love, cars, and opens three garages. Things are under control.

He starts dating a girl who works at the burger place near the largest of the garages. Stephanie's tough without being nasty and hot without being stuck-up. She's got a kid, and from the way she talks about her son Jason can tell that she'd do anything for him. Jason likes her a lot.

On Jason's 18th birthday, he stakes out on a rooftop so he can keep his eye on all the major hotspots that dealers frequent. There's a new and highly dangerous drug on the scene and he'll be damned if he's going to let any scumbag sell it on his turf.

It's a mild night and there's not much going on, but Jason sticks around anyway. It's shortly before dawn when he hears footsteps behind him.

Those responsible have been dealt with, the Batman says.

Good, answers Jason. *It's not right, you know? People are just trying to keep it together. Giving them a temptation like that's just shitty.* He pauses, runs his hand through his hair, and sighs. *It's been a long night. We met once. You probably don't remember.*

Yes, I do. It's vaguely creepy to see the stony face break into a slight smile. *You're a hard one to forget, Jason.*

Jason laughs at that.

You do good work here, the Batman tells him.

Yeah. Jason nods. *I do.*

TWO

"I knew I'd find you, eventually."

"I've been following you for a long time," she answers him. "I was never sure if it was really me you were after."

"Mmm." He nods, sighs despite a lack of need for the action. Then, as if he has given her words consideration, "Is that true? I mean, don't you know everything?"

"Eventually," she echoes, in the same flat tone as he gave to the word.

Everything is flat now, muted and grey like river-water. Everything but the bright colours of cape and tunic around him. But that was always the way.

"Yes," she says now, as if she has heard him speak aloud.

"Did it hurt?" he asks, blurting the words and afraid of getting an answer.

"Do you remember it hurting?"

"Not properly. It's like when a nightmare fades, once you wake up."

"Yes."

"I didn't want to die," Jason says, as angrily as he can manage. "I wasn't looking for you."

She doesn't reply. She is leading him somewhere, and he follows because there seems nothing else to do instead. Their footsteps make no sound. Her hair

is black like the words *oblivion* and *nothing* and *gone* are black, and he shivers in the primary armour of his uniform.

"So, what, that's it, is it?" He quickens his pace to catch up with her stride. She's the only constant left to him, after all. Perhaps she's right, and it's been that way for a while.

"Did you expect something more?" And now she stops and turns, and Jason nearly crashes into her, and she smiles and steadies him with slim, pale hands. She's no taller than he is, and her gaze is all he could have wished for from a mother's eye.

"Well, yeah. No. Kinda," mutters Jason with an uncomfortable, tongue-tied shift from foot to foot. "It feels so lame, to be... the dead sidekick. Like I'm the frumpy chick, who's a bridesmaid at all the weddings and never gets hitched herself. Poor Cock Robin, like in the song."

"Robin didn't die."

"Uh." Jason gestures at the hazy blankness surrounding them. He doesn't know how to answer her. People are always saying that Death's unfair, but he's never heard it said that she's completely out of her freakin' mind.

"Usually, it's life that people say is unfair. Though there's hardly a difference, from the wider perspective," she says softly, and her smile somehow manages to look sad and jubilant all at once.

"Guess my perspective's kind of narrow, then," Jason retorts. "What do you mean, anyway, 'Robin didn't die'?"

"Jason Todd did."

"Oh, great," Jason mutters. "Head games. Is this some mythic hero shit about how a function is more than the person inside it?"

"Something like that," she admits, and pats his shoulder. "It's not so bad. You were part of a big, important thing, Jason. You have much to be proud of."

"Yeah, and I've also got a past tense and a bloodied corpse, so forgive me if I don't break out the champagne." That's not a quip he'd make, under ordinary circumstances, and Jason can't help but wonder if his brain's becoming part of that collective unconscious thing or something now. All the edges of his mind feel like they're blurring and dimming.

"You're forgiven," she tells him cheerfully, and then grabs him and hugs him tight. She's holding him like she never wants to let him go, and it's like having a sister and a mother and a girlfriend and all the rest all at once. Jason can smell something kinda like cafes in the early morning, toast and butter and coffee. He can hear a sound, like a bird's wings beating against the air, and even as he hates that this is the last thought he's gonna have it seems weirdly fitting. A big, important thing.

His vision flares to red, fades to the colours of her hair, and there is quiet.

THREE

The first snap, he doesn't really notice. The girls' moms have barely left earshot, so the world doesn't feel all that big or looming or mysterious beyond the circle of light from the campfire. There're all kinds

of animals out doing late-night animal things and making little noises in the woods; Kon doesn't think much about the second small sound either.

Still, it must've made some impression on him, because the third one makes him sit up straighter and listen more closely to the night. He hopes it's more hunters. Or an evil robot hell-bent on destroying the world. He could do with one of them showing up. Of course, an evil robot probably wouldn't bother skulking around in the dark.

Kon considers giving the area a once-over anyway. Just so he's got something to do that's not watching the flicker of the fire against the trees around the clearing.

Another twig-snap sound, and then Robin comes out of the tent, holding up a hand before Kon can say anything.

"It's over to the left," Robin whispers, coming over to crouch beside him. "And it's circling. Probably human, or humanoid at least. Two-legged gait."

"You really were trained by the world's gre-" Kon starts to say before being cut off with a hiss from Robin. "Okay, I'm being quiet. Want to go check it out? I'm more than ready to take down some nasties right now."

"Stay here, keep watch on the others. I'll go," orders Robin, pulling his staff out. His jaw's doing that clenchy grim thing.

"Don't freak out. I bet it's a deer or a squirrel. Something little and furry and harmless."

Robin's probably glaring at him under the mask. "Stay here, okay?"

"Aye aye." Kon sighs, settling back down. "Hope it's a bat," he mutters to the dying remnants of the fire. "Even Rob'd have to find *that* funny."

Tim's eyes feel all gross and gritty, because he can't rub the sleep out of them without putting the lenses of the mask up, and right now he's gotta finish the infra-red sweep over the area. He's sure that there's something up ahead now, because the air is too still, the woods all around are too quiet. Nothing's showing up.

A rustle above. Movement, but still no temperature change recorded by the infra-red.

Tim forces himself to stand at what looks vaguely like ease and speak at an ordinary conversational volume. "Show yourself."

A rush of air as a figure jumps down from the branches of the tree on Tim's left, landing with a soft thump and blending in with the surroundings. Tim's gotten too used to the inner-city version of night, and the quality of the shadows out here isn't nearly so familiar as he'd like.

"I'm impressed. The two masks, that's a level of anal I didn't credit even you with."

Tim allows a moment of cool relief at the sound of the voice, then snorts and retracts his staff. Crossing his arms over his chest under the cape, he keeps his own tone light in reply. "You're lying."

"Yeah." The darkness moves in a way that suggests a shrug. "But still. Good to know you haven't lost your touch in your old age."

"I didn't know you were -" Tim doesn't act on the urge to rub at the corner of his jaw below his ear, a

tic he thought he'd long discarded. "It's been a while. I assumed you were still in Japan."

"I'm not stupid. The only reason he hasn't canceled those cards is to keep tabs on me. I don't use them for anything that'd let you guys know where I actually was."

"That's not true. About the cards," says Tim, even though it's not wrong either. "He feels responsible for you."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'guilty', Robin."

"So you aren't in Japan."

"Obviously."

"What have you been doing, then?"

"Stuff." A snigger. "Watching you nearly wet yourself at the sound of a couple of twigs snapping."

Tim lets himself laugh. "There was never a chance of me wetting myself."

"You just keep telling yourself that."

"I will." Tim's smile fades into mild amusement. "Well, come on then."

"Huh?"

"There's no way I'm letting Superboy rag on me for being jumpy when there really was something lurking. You're coming back with me to the camp."

Tim raises the lenses for long enough to rub his eyes on the walk back to the clearing, and smothers a yawn behind his hand. There's probably no chance he'll get back to bed before daybreak.

"You sleeping okay?"

"Well enough." And if they were different people, Tim would add a sarcastic '*mom*' onto the end of that.

Superboy's still sitting by the fire. Tim's tempted to classify his expression as brooding, but it clears and turns back into a smile as Tim comes closer.

"Was it a squirrel?" Superboy asks Tim, then looks surprised as he realises that Robin's not alone.

"Nope," Tim says with a trace of smugness. "Told you it wasn't."

"Some random kid was hanging out in the woods?"

"No, this is..." Tim glances behind him.

"Domino," comes the reply.

"Friend of yours, Rob?"

Tim raises one shoulder in a small half-shrug. "We've met before."

"Like your costume," Domino says to Superboy, giving him a slow look of appraisal. Tim rolls his eyes behind the lenses as Superboy comes over to hover a few feet away from the two of them, grinning at the compliment. It's easier for Tim to see properly here, by the light of the campfire, and he gives Domino's own costume a look up and down. Black boots, black tights, long black sleeves ending in gloves, a many-pocketed vest (black), and a mask to match the name. His face is all gold-grey and shadowed and smirking in the uneven light.

"Are you an urban legend too? Does it ever bug you guys that you don't get endorsement deals?" Superboy asks.

"It doesn't bug me. No crazed fans, this way."

"Hey, man, crazed fans are *cool*. They throw underwear, sometimes."

"And sometimes they invent death rays. I'll pass."

"Hey, you gotta take the bad with the good," Superboy answers.

Domino is smiling. Superboy is smiling back. Tim wishes he was still asleep.

"I know you know I'm here."

"So come down. You're stealing my lurking schtick," Robin says.

Domino drops from the narrow sill of the higher building beside the Woodford Apartments block, landing in a crouch next to Robin. "What're we doing?"

"There's a guy selling pirate dvds by mail order from this address."

"Wow. You're really doing your bit against the important breaches of justice in the world."

"Your sarcasm is harmless against my powers of not listening," Robin replies. "How could you tell that I knew you were there?"

"You rub that scar on your jaw. Nervous tics are never a good idea when you've got a secret identity, they're too easily recognisable."

"Did you have fun on the weekend?"

"Yeah," Domino answers. "You've got a good bunch there. Secret guessed about me after, like, two seconds."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She made a crack about how I don't drink... soda."

"Secret made a pop culture reference? As a joke? That's -" Robin shakes his head with another little grin. "Anyway, were you okay with that?"

"A pop culture reference?"

"Your sense of humour is even deader than you are."

Domino has to cover his own mouth with one dark-gloved hand to muffle a howl of laughter. "The olds are right, you YJ guys are a bad influence on each other. He'd be seriously pissed if he heard you say that."

"You're laughing, and I'd say you're the one I should worry about offending."

"Yeah, well, if you can't laugh, what've you got left?"

Robin hums agreement, and then says, "The reason I asked about whether you had fun or not is that I think you should seriously consider making it a regular thing."

"Aw, c'mon, don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll say no, and you'll be all pretending that you're not angry that I turned it down, and whenever I run into your team it'll make me feel uncomfortable."

"I'm not asking you to be a full member." Robin rubs his thumb against the scar on his jaw, then pauses and drops his hand with a snort. "I don't know if I would want that, even if you did. But you should keep up contact. A visit every two months, maybe. It's in your best interests in the long term, for the same reasons I'm glad Superboy's on the team. You're both young now, and so are we. If we get used to you, and learn to respect your suitability and skill, then it'll make life much easier for you in twenty years. By then, some of us'll be in the JLA, and won't it be better if the olds, as you called them, are a bunch of people who don't even think twice about the fact you'll still look fifteen?"

"Jesus, dude, please tell me that you haven't put serious thought into this. You're hanging with your buds and you don't want me to be a loner psycho, does it need to be deeper than that? I bet you haven't tried this line on Superboy."

"He doesn't think like we do."

"We'? Huntress crosses herself whenever she thinks I might be around. Nightwing and Oracle get really quiet, and the big guy... there's no 'we', especially not that includes me."

"If you'd just *talk* to him -"

"He'd like to pretend I'm just a suit in a jar. Forget it."

They lapse into silence, Domino drumming his fingers against his knee.

"I hate stakeouts."

"I did notice that, oddly enough."

"Once every two months, you think?"

"Mm-hmm." Robin gives a nod.

"They'll find out."

"They're cool. They don't mind Secret, and she's much stranger than you. It'll be okay."

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant, you know, the Bats. I'm sure they know I'm back in town. You really want them knowing I'm being a bad influence on baby brother's playgroup, too?"

"I'm not that much younger than you."

"That's not the point I was making."

"I wouldn't be here without you." This time, when Robin runs his thumb against the scar, it's deliberate. "Nightwing and I could've talked 'til we were blue in the face, but who knows if Batman would've relented in the end?"

"What did you say to him?"

"Stuff about how when police officers get killed others take their place, because the need for justice doesn't stop. I don't remember the exact words. I babbled a bit."

"Lemme guess. He was doing that no-reply thing that just makes you wanna fill the quiet up with as much talking as you can."

"I didn't give him the chance to reply, to tell the truth. I played the only card I had left in my deck; I said you'd told me that Robin needed to go on."

Domino gives a low whistle. "Never pegged you as a gambling man. Risky."

"No, I think he - they. Nightwing too. They needed to know I had your approval. You guys were all still so messed up over what'd happened."

"As opposed to now?"

"You're none of you the same people. We move on. Still, I do think you need to talk."

"Never been our style." Domino taps Robin on the arm. "Looks like we've got something happening. Let's go."

Two whirs, two thuds, two blurs of movement swinging into the dark.

Three Saturday nights later, when Domino drops in for a visit, there's less than nothing going on. The girls are off having secret incomprehensible girl fun, possibly involving a boy band concert. Robin and Superboy are reading - a newspaper for Robin, a magazine for Superboy - and so Domino settles in to watch Bart play 'Evil Mutant Monkey Madness 12' on the gamestation.

"Hey, do you wanna come out with us tomorrow? Maybe something cool will happen and we'll have to defeat evil."

"I can't. Next time you've got something going on after hours, though, count me in. Thanks for the offer."

Bart hits the pause button on his controlpad. Domino's casual voice sounds almost exactly like Robin's. Bart knows that he's not exactly known as the most observant of the team, but it would be hard to miss the tension Domino's suddenly giving off.

"Seriously, you can if you like. You're welcome to. Even though you're a night-time hero guy, like Robin. He does stuff in the day with us."

"Impulse," Robin says, folding up his newspaper. "Domino's allergic to sunlight."

"Really? Whoa. You mean you're kinda like a vampire?"

Domino gives Robin a look that Bart can't read, and doesn't say anything. Robin clears his throat and rubs at the point where neck and jaw meet under his ear.

"More like 'exactly' than 'kinda'," says Robin.

"Oh." Bart cocks his head to one side. "Do you have a gypsy curse? Because on tv, the good vampires have gypsy curses sometimes." He puts the gamestation controls down, game forgotten. "Do you drink blood? Sleep in a coffin? Are you gonna live forever? Will you ever get any older than you are? How long have you -" "Bart," Robin says. Bart shuts up for a few seconds, then thinks of something else.

"Did you bite Robin? Is that why he keeps touching that scar when he talks to you? Is it a sex

thing or a food thing, or are they the same thing for you? Does metahuman blood taste different? What about alien blood?"

"I told you that someone'd notice the scar thing," Domino says to Robin with a smirk before turning back to Bart. "No, I don't have a gypsy curse, or sleep in a coffin."

"And he didn't bite me," Robin puts in, two spots of colour appearing on his cheeks below the mask.

"I don't bite anybody. There are suppliers for people like me."

"Really? Is it a big conspiracy? A good conspiracy, because it means you're not biting people."

"Uh, I guess?" Domino looks kinda overwhelmed, and also like he really wants to start laughing.

"So how'd you become a vampire? What happened? Are you a hundred years old?"

"That's enough questions for now, I think," Robin says in what Bart can't help but think of as a teacher voice.

Superboy looks like he's thinking hard about something, but doesn't say anything. After a moment, Bart shrugs and goes back to his game. "I know a vampire. That's *cool*," he says before focussing on the evil mutant monkeys.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Bart hears Superboy ask Domino.

"Sure." The two of them go somewhere out of earshot. Bart mashes the punch button on the controller, doing his best to save the world from evil ape invaders. Bright red pixels cover the screen in an explosion.

Putting the control pad down, Bart turns. Robin's standing in the same place he was five minutes ago, looking in the direction where the others walked off. Sometimes Bart wonders how Robin can stand to be so *still*. The only part of him that's moving at all is the muscle in his jaw.

"So. Now they know."

"Now they know," Tim echoes.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Domino snorts. "Usually, your lies are more convincing than that."

"Really. It's nothing."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Just thought I should give you this." Domino hands Tim a small piece of paper with a phone number scrawled across it. "My cell. Don't let... well, you know. Gimme a call whenever."

"All right." Tim nods. Then, letting out his breath, he relaxes slightly. "Don't be a stranger."

"Same back atcha, Robin."

It's two months, one week before there's reason for Tim to call the number.

"Hey. You can tell me to rack off, I won't take it personally."

Cissie sighs, and turns the tv off with the remote. "No, it's all right. Come in. I should've known you guys wouldn't drop it."

"Robin said you quit." Domino sits down, relaxed as if he climbs in windows every night. Possibly,

that's because he does. Cissie has no idea what he usually spends his time doing.

She looks up from staring at the pattern of the couch's armrest. Her eyes are puffy and pinked. "He say why?"

He gives her a curt nod. "Yeah."

It takes Cissie a few seconds to realise that he's wearing ordinary black jeans and a black sweater, instead of the usual costume. The street clothes make it slightly weirder that he's still got his mask on, but their standards of weird aren't really all that much like other people's.

"So, what?" she says after a while of quiet. "You here to tell me I'm wrong? To go back? To go freelance, like you?"

"I'm not here to tell you anything. I figured you might wanna talk."

"I can't be Arrowette again."

"Yeah, you're right. You can't."

Cissie winces. She knew it was true, but it's still terrible to hear said so surely.

"A few years back, I... Christ, Robin's a weird guy, isn't he? I can't believe he decided I was the guy who should talk to you, considering. See, a few years ago -" Domino pauses. His hands are clenched and white-knuckled on his knees. "My partner at the time wasn't so fast in finding me as Superboy was in finding you."

For a minute, Cissie doesn't say anything. She shuts her eyes tight, hugging her arms and rocking back and forth a little.

"I think I'm going to be sick." Her voice sounds dull with the horror. Then, timidly, barely above a whisper, "Did it help? I can still hear her still hear

her screaming in my head, and -" Cissie gulps. "It's louder than the rest. It's louder than the guilt. I think I could deal with the guilt if she would be quiet."

"She won't ever be."

Cissie doesn't want to cry in front of Domino. She doesn't know him even as well as she knows the regular team, and hates that he'll think she's a weak little kid. But she can't help it. The sobs come, making her stomach muscles hurt and her throat feel raw. She can hardly breathe for the choke.

"My hands don't feel like my own hands anymore. My skin's not my skin. I just want to -" Running out of words, she buries her face in her hands. Domino's there beside her in a moment, holding her tight enough that she feels safe enough to let go a little more and scream against his shoulder.

"I've got you," Domino promises. "I've got you."

When she can't cry anymore, can't breathe enough for screaming, Cissie sits back. Domino's shirt is all snotty and gross, but he doesn't comment as he wipes at it with the tissue she offers.

"Sorry. I didn't know I was gonna do that," she says, blushing a little.

"Don't worry about it. Look, you're lucky, you've got time to stop and decide what you wanna do now. Don't think you've gotta make a decision right away, and don't let anyone else push you about it. When I - when it happened to me, I didn't have a chance, not until a bunch of other bad stuff happened too. By the time I did slow down and think about everything, I didn't have a choice anymore about being who I'd been. I had to start again.

"I get why you can't be Arrowette anymore. Heroes aren't allowed to fail, they don't get second tries. Kids learn that two-wrongs-don't-make-a-right stuff in daycare, what good's a hero who can't understand that?" Domino pauses, and takes one of Cissie's hands between his own. He's not wearing gloves, and his skin's calloused and careful. "But you're not just Arrowette, just a symbol. You're Cissie, you're a person, and people always have another chance. You'll find someone new to be. Someone great."

Cissie draws in a shuddering breath. "So what about you? How come you're still doing this? How can you trust yourself?"

Domino shrugs. "Got nothing else, I guess."

"Did you go see her?"

"Yeah. It's a good thing I went over when I did, she was watching that reality tv garbage. I saved her from a fate worse than death."

"Not a fan?" Robin asks.

"Contests where the outcome's decided by a bunch of mouth-breathers dialling one-nine-hundred numbers? No thanks."

"So how is she?"

"Okay I guess. Or she will be, at least. So how've you been?"

"All right. You?"

"Yeah, I've been good." Domino pauses, and smiles a little. "Me and Superboy talk a lot. Online and stuff. He's pretty cool."

Robin's jaw clenches. "Hmm?"

Suddenly, Domino laughs. "Dude. Oh, Robin, dude, you are such a crackup. Just..." he pauses, and

pretends to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. The effect is spoiled somewhat by the mask. "I'm gonna make you a deal, okay? If you'll just talk, really talk, to him, I'll... geez. I'll talk to Batman. Actual talking, not shouting."

Robin blinks in surprise behind his mask. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, talk to Superboy. Even you should be able to understand an order like that, Boy Clueless."

"You're early. I thought I'd be first to get here for sure," Kon says in surprise. Robin's sitting at the table with his fingers steepled against his chin. It makes him look a little like he's plotting something dastardly.

"Domino said I should talk to you."

"Oh." Kon sits down too, a few places down from Robin. "Okay." He thinks for a second. "Um. What about?"

"I don't know. I assumed you would be able to tell me."

Kon shrugs. "No idea."

"Are the pair of you -" Robin looks like he's way out of his depth. The indecision on his face is freaking Kon out. Robin's supposed to be the one who understands stuff, so that Kon can get it explained. "A pair?"

"What?"

"You're slightly similar in many ways, both situational and in your personalities. It wouldn't be surprising if you found an affinity."

"You're talking like a Bat again."

Robin smiles a little. "Sorry."

"You thought me and Domino were... I thought *you* guys were. You've got secrets that nobody else knows, seems like. Dom says he has a girlfriend, so I figured that it wasn't still a -" Kon shrugs. "But for all I know the Batman gang doesn't think about all that stuff in the same way as norm... as ordin... as other people do, so I didn't wanna say the wrong thing. In case you were still a -"

"A thing?" Robin supplies.

"Yeah."

"He has a girlfriend? I didn't know that."

"Some chick named Natalia. He seems really into her."

"He never told me that. Sneaky bastard."

"Yeah, you're one to talk," Kon points out, pushing his hair back off his forehead and grinning.

"So you're not a pair?"

Robin shakes his head. "No. Things are quite complicated enough without that. And you're not, either?"

"Nope. So, *is* that a bite? Your scar?"

Robin touches the little white mark on his neck. "No. But Domino was the one who gave it to me. The first time I met him."

"You guys have weird ways of getting introduced."

"You assume he's one of the Bats."

"Isn't he?"

"Not exactly. Do you remember when you and Bart and I were down in the Cave, when the adults were missing?"

"Yeah, 'course."

"Do you remember the Robin suit, in the glass case?"

"The one you yelled at Imp to get away from."

"Yes. That was never my suit. It belonged to the Robin before me."

"Are you sure you're allowed to tell me this? Aren't you supposed to not say anything incriminating about who you are?" Kon tries to stop himself sounding pissed about that, even though it bugs him a lot.

"I'm not. I'm trying to tell you as much as I can about the other parts of my life without telling you more than I'm able," Robin explains. "I think that's why it bothered me so much, the idea of the two of you being so close. Sometimes, the only way I can handle everything is to keep every area of my life separate from the others."

"So Domino used to be Robin?"

"Yes. When I was thirteen, I went looking for Batman. There hadn't been a Robin for a while, and Batman was getting sloppy. It scared me. I wanted to fix things."

"No offense, I bet you were a creepy-as-hell kid, Rob."

"Probably," Robin agrees with a nod. "Anyway, I was tracking down an associate of Batman's. I went to his apartment, and suddenly I'm pinned against a wall and this guy's holding a knife to my throat. He'd been following me while I followed Batman. He thought I was a threat. After a bit of a scuffle -" Robin rubs at the scar again. "- we worked out that we were on the same side. We've been, well, friends, since. In a broad definition of the word."

"How come he's not Robin anymore? Is it the vampire thing? How did that happen?"

Robin shakes his head. "That's not my story to tell. I don't even know all of it."

"You know, next time I feel like my life's messed up, I'm just gonna ask you to talk about the people you know for a while. Makes me feel better."

"I'm so glad." Robin's voice is dry, but he's still smiling. Kon smiles back.

"So, did you guys talk?" Domino asks, next time he shows up during Tim's patrol.

"Yes. Did you?"

Domino mutters something.

"What was that?"

"Not yet."

"I hope you do. And soon."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Domino keeps pace as they move from block to block. "It still doesn't feel real. Even now. I mean, this one time? We fought a guy who thought bathing in blood would make him live forever. He killed so many people. Tortured Batman. It was horrible. I still get bad dreams about it. And another time, we stopped these guys who were stealing blood from a blood bank. I made tons of wisecracks about vampires during that fight. It's something the villains do, you know? Something the bad guys are. I can't make it all fit together in my head."

"Maybe talking to Batman will sort some of that out."

"Yeah, maybe. I wanna ask him why he had that vial on his belt in the first place. How long he'd had that precaution in place, 'specially considering that he obviously regretted it within the second of deciding to use it." Domino shakes his head, his

features shadowed despite the paleness of his skin. "He wants me to hate him, I think. To wish that I was dead. But I can't. I can't say that I think what he did was wrong, because I'm grateful to still be around, even like this."

"These are the things you should be saying to him, Jason. Not to me."

"I don't think I've ever heard you use my name before."

"Do you mind?"

"No." Domino shakes his head. "No, I don't. I guess I should go find him, hey? Say some of this stuff before I chicken out."

"Good luck."

"Thanks. Not just for the good luck, either. For everything. I'm glad we have... whatever it is that we have."

Tim nods. "Same back atcha," he says.

FOUR

"I want to talk to you."

Jason doesn't look away from the television. A talk show host is hugging someone.

"Turn that off."

He turns the volume up.

"Jason, turn the television off and talk to me, or I'm going to shock you with my tazer. Don't think I won't. I've got no patience for this."

"Cry me a river," he says, flicking the channel over to football. "I've got no patience for your pep talks."

"I wish you'd died, too."

Jason looks at Barbara in surprise, and turns the tv off. "What?"

"You said it to hurt him, but I'm saying it because it's true." She wheels herself to beside where he's sitting. "I wish you'd died, Jason."

"Why? I'm hogging all the cripple-pity now?"

There's a tiny flinch deep in her eyes. Jason almost feels like a crummy bastard for causing it.

When Barbara starts talking, her voice is steady. "Because you're hurting everyone who comes near you as much as you possibly can, and I don't take kindly to people who do that. Your self-indulgent misery over the last year has done more damage to Bruce's wellbeing than a lifetime of guilt over his parents did." Her words are cool, almost vicious in their conversational tone. "If it wasn't for Tim, I'd bet that Batman would be gone by now, and you've made the poor kid as miserable as you can at every turn. You hate yourself, you hate everyone around you, and you want them to hate you too. So I wish you were dead, because there isn't a single person in this house who wouldn't be happier."

"You telling me I should off myself, Barbara?"

"I'm telling you that shit happens, Jason. Things would be less difficult if you were dead, and they'd be even better still if we weren't hurt. But we are, and you're alive, so get the hell over it and stop rotting away in front of the television. No wonder you get headaches."

"I get headaches because my brain was severely bruised by a fucking crowbar."

"Yeah, and I got shot. But that doesn't stop people from making off-colour jokes. Deal."

"Will you shut up and just leave me alone?" Jason shouts. Barbara doesn't blink.

"No."

"What the hell difference does it make to you if I'm wasting my time watching tv and feeling sorry for myself?"

"I can't let him win."

"Oh, for crying out -"

"I can't let the Joker destroy us, all of us. Splinter us. I *won't*."

"In case you missed the memo, I'm not one of 'us' anymore. There's a new Robin, and he's already nearly as good as I was on my best days. I've been replaced, so leave me out of your group hug, okay?"

"Bruce still loves you, Jason. That hasn't changed."

"Not yet. But it will. How can it not, when I'm no use to the Batman?"

Jason pauses, as if waiting for her to deny the truth of his words. She looks at him for a long time and he feels his temper rise to flaring again. He hates people looking at his face.

"Then you've got two options. Accept it, or change it."

"Change *what*? I can't go back out there, even if Tim hadn't replaced me. Doctors said that the physical therapy'd only get me up to walking with a cane at best. My vision's shot, and the headaches are murder."

"Do you remember what happened with Branneck?"

Now it's Jason's turn to flinch. "Yeah."

"Garzonas?"

"Jesus, Barbara, don't bring that -"

"It got you angry, didn't it? The law failed."

"What's your point?"

"Wouldn't it be great if we had someone working that side of things? Making sure that the people who got caught stayed caught, got what they deserve?"

"You want me to be a *lawyer*? I didn't even finish high school."

"So there's your first step." Barbara turns her chair and moves towards the door. "Otherwise, you might as well get on with it and end it once and for all. Live, or die. Your call."

Jason hates his crutches. He hates looking at his legs, all withered-looking and stumbling and awkward. He'd give up anything to be able to go for a run one last time.

He hates the aches and pains all through his body, the way it feels like there are still little cracks in all his bones for the cold to seep into. He hates how hard it is to get his eyes to focus on most things. He hates his headaches. He hates how his cheek and chin look like someone shot him with a gun full of gravel.

He's not sure if he actually wishes he were dead, though. Being dead might be even worse, especially considering that his soul's probably not as lily-white as it could be.

He uses the computer Bruce gave him when he got out of the hospital to look up GEDs and correspondence school and all the things he never thought he'd care about. After a while of squinting at the screen a headache knocks him around, as bad as the crowbar all over again. He's got pills for the pain, but they turn him into a zombie for hours. He grits his teeth, ignores the stabbing behind his eyes, and keeps looking at sites.

He hates to admit it, but it feels good to have something to do.

Jason visits his mom's grave a lot. The ground is springy, and sometimes he worries that he'll fall. That would be humiliating, even though the cemetery's near to deserted usually.

Mostly he goes there just to talk to himself, to work stuff out in his head. Sometimes he swears a blue streak. Usually he cries. One time he brought flowers, but didn't end up leaving them.

Physiotherapy sucks, and the CT scans are boring as hell, and Jason hates being anywhere where there are lots of people around. He knows they're looking at him and wondering what happened to his face. But he's got nothing better to do with his time, and appointments cost the same even if he skips them, so he might as well go.

Nobody at home makes any comment on the fact he's studying now. If they did, Jason would probably bite their heads off. He feels guilty for how badly he's acted towards them for so long, but doesn't say sorry. Better to just change and make up for it however he can.

Sometimes in the afternoons, when he's sitting at the shorter of the two long dining tables, Tim will come in with his own school books. They don't talk or anything, but it's nice to have the company. Maybe one day they'll swap Robin stories.

On the day Jason gets his high school equivalency diploma and doesn't tell anyone, Alfred makes pot roast for dinner. It's Jason's favourite, and there's an extra scoop of ice cream in his dessert.

Sometimes Jason thinks that it's really Alfred who's the world's greatest detective.

He swallows his pride and asks for Barbara's help on his admissions essay for college. Jason figures he'll have to tell everyone else what he's up to sooner or later - if they haven't guessed already - but that doesn't mean he wants them to know yet.

"You should go to an optometrist," she tells him while proof-reading one of his drafts. "Glasses might help with your headaches."

They don't, but they do make it a bit easier to see clearly. Jason picks out really thick, black frames, which dominate his face and mean it's that extra half-second before people notice his scars. He's got a new cane, too, but still feels anxious with it. The crutches feel almost normal to use by now. He feels like a dork, but that's a step up from feeling like a freak.

And maybe he is a dork, anyway. A non-dork probably wouldn't call the student intake office every day to see if he's been accepted. Two of the receptionists know who he is as soon as he speaks, now.

People aren't treating him the same as they used to. Dick's started calling him 'squirt' and 'kid' again, and sometimes Jason retorts with 'old timer' or 'gramps' just to see if he can get away with it. Tim doesn't look like a rabbit in headlights whenever they're in the same room with nobody else around. Barbara's stopped looking like he's something a dog's left on the pavement, and always asks how things are going.

It's a really good day when he can tell her that he's been accepted for the course.

"I knew you could do it," she says. "Congratulations." Her voice isn't warm, exactly, but she sounds satisfied.

"I couldn't have, without you," he answers.

"What're families for?" replies Barbara.

College is hard. Really hard. Jason always knew he was kinda dumb, but this is even more complicated than he expected. How anybody jumps from school into this seems a mystery to him. But he likes going to the lectures, and walking around campus and seeing ordinary people doing ordinary stuff like play Frisbee and eat lunch under trees in the courtyard. Nobody there knows anything about where he's come from or who he used to be. He's just Jason, the quiet guy in glasses with the walking cane, the one with the scars.

With so much studying to do just to feel like he's keeping on top of the basics, Jason doesn't have time anymore to go down to the cave and watch Batman and Robin get suited up in the evenings. He hates to miss it, because it always gives him a sad little thrill to see them ready to go, but he's got his own stuff to do now. He'd probably forget to eat, if Alfred didn't make him sandwiches and coffee and leave them where he'll notice.

When he was Robin, he never bothered much with meditation or anything like that. It seemed a waste of time. It still seems like a waste of time, especially when there always seems to be some essay due that he's got no idea how to start, but it does help with the headaches a bit. He can't remember the last time he took a painkiller.

And then, just as Jason's getting used to the routine of classes and assignments and everything, it's exam time and then it's vacation. It's two years, nine months since Ethiopia. It feels like a century.

"I'm sure there are other places you could spend your birthday."

"I should have know you'd remember," Jason says, not particularly annoyed. He's eighteen years old. He doesn't know whether he feels it or not.

"Your contracts tutor called. Your exam results are back."

"Oh, great way to rain on a guy's day." Jason blows his nose and stands up, using the headstone for support. His cane's resting against it, and settles into his hand like a habit. "How bad did I screw up?"

"His exact words were, if I recall, 'I haven't seen such dedication to, and passion for, the law for many years. Since Harvey Dent'."

"You know he's just saying that 'cos of my scars." Jason rubs at his cheek and gives Bruce a small smile. "I did okay, huh?"

"You have every reason to be proud. I certainly am."

"Thanks. That's one semester down, anyway."

They stand together in the quiet. Jason stares at his mother's headstone until the name and dates blur into indecipherability.

"She sold me out, you know."

"Yes, I know," Bruce answers. Jason blinks rapidly to clear his vision and looks at Bruce, shocked.

"You do?"

"That first week, your concussion caused you to talk a lot. Most of it was too delirious to make sense of, but you were very worried about her. You said you didn't care, and that you forgave her."

"Wish I was still so sure about that."

Bruce rests his arm across Jason's shoulders. Jason can't remember the last time Bruce did that, but guesses that Jason was wearing elf shoes and hotpants at the time. It's nice to have it back.

"This is no place to spend a birthday," Jason says, even though it's pretty typical behaviour for the people he knows. "I just wanted to... say goodbye. I don't think I'll be coming back here anymore. I think that if you talk to ghosts too much, you turn into one yourself. You know what I mean? You forget about the people who're still alive."

Bruce doesn't answer. Jason leans on him as they walk away.

FIVE

Rachael's mind is changing.

The pale pinks, the rose pattern on the bedspread and pillows, are darkening to the blood-flush of a warm lip. The light is brighter, whiter, no longer the golden glow of a night light. Objects are starting to cast clear shadows.

Rachael's gonna be fourteen in two months, and Jason's afraid that she'll want him gone soon. That she'll think that there are other teenage boys she'd rather have on the brain. He doesn't know what he'll do, if that happens.

Rach's mind is a self-contained thing, even as far as minds go. Dick's mind was a sprawling, frenetic, colourful mess, impossible to even guess the edges of. Tim's was compartments, a thousand thousand drawers with neat labels, just as large as Dick's but as unlike that brain as any can be while remaining so similar in some ways. Alfred's, an imperfect fractal, a pattern that always fell just shy of being an exact repetition.

But Rachael's is small, the size of a bedroom where other people contain whole cities and countries of space inside them. It's a neat, comfortable bedroom. There are things here Jason recognises from tv shows Rachael has watched, items she's pilfered from the houses and worlds in books. Harry Potter's glasses and Luke Skywalker's lightsaber are both lying amongst the makeup debris on the white-lacquered dressing table. There are two bookshelves, stuffed to what would be impossibly full anywhere but inside a head, containing all the things she knows and remembers about the world.

And there's the window, beside the bed, shade drawn down. Once, Jason snuck a peek outside. It's dark on the other side of the glass, black and full of things that might be moving, might be coming closer or watching or just lurching, gliding, stumbling around.

Sometimes he worries. Wonders what Rachael's head might look like if he hadn't spent so much time here. This little room is pretty, safe and comfortable, but maybe she'd be happier with more room to move, more space to shove random thoughts aside to look at later. Jason worries that one of those dark things outside the window is going to break in one

day. He's worried that he's messed her up completely, even though he was just trying to do his best.

"Tard."

He turns. She's leaning against the door, which has no handle. "English class," she explains with a wave of her hand. "I'm dozing. And you're a tard."

"Why's that?"

"Sitting in here stressing about whether I'm going to go crazy one day because of how I designed my head."

"You've got a lot of creepy shit out there, Rach." He gestures to the window.

"Doesn't mean I'm *scared* of it, Jay. I just don't want it in here."

"Really?" Jason wants to believe her.

"Yeah." Rachael nods. "Are you hanging around?"

"I was gonna go for a while. Couple of days, maybe."

Rachael makes a small hmm-ing sound. "All right."

A sharp voice cuts through the stillness of the room. "Rachael Willis, are you paying attention? Chapter four, girl."

"Looks like I gotta run," Rachael says. "Mr Byrne's out for blood."

"See ya."

"Bye." She's gone as quickly and quietly as she arrived. After a minute, Jason leaves too.

He winds up at Arkham, as usual, as evening gives way to night. Doing the rounds.

Once in a while, he wonders what might've happened if he'd lived. He can't imagine that he'd ever give the suit up by choice, not like Tim did.

Jason would say that this kind of life, this kind of work, is in his blood, but he doesn't actually have blood anymore, so it's not a good metaphor. And if Rachael feels a keen need to dress up in a costume and prowl the night, she hasn't let on to him about it. Maybe doing this kind of thing is something right deep down in Jason's soul.

Poison Ivy's looking a little peaky. Etiolated, that's called, when plants go pale out of the sun. Rachael did botany in science last term.

Pretty much everyone else is asleep already, and Jason takes a look into the minds which open up for him. It's never easy to predict who will open and who will push, but Jason's spent so much time here that he knows who's likely to let him in. Nobody's plotting anything in any kind of serious way. It's summer, and much too hot to bother with escape attempts or really evil plans.

The Joker's awake, but that doesn't mean as much as it does with most other people.

The first few times Jason ended up in the Joker's head, it was way too intense for him to deal with. He left straight away, flitting from brain to brain halfway across the country before he'd let himself pause and take stock. But before very long, Jason had decided that it was time to bite the bullet and take a look. The Joker couldn't do anything to him now, and it would be a bad idea to avoid checking up on someone like that out of personal hang-ups.

Even now, he feels a wave of squeamishness as he steps inside. There's another him in here, but it's

a weak thing. A plaything, a toy made to bruise and break when the fancy takes its owner. Bones and rot, sometimes, still all dressed up in red and yellow and green.

Jason wasn't buried in that suit. His body was pretty putrid looking, by the time he got a funeral, but someone managed to get a grey jacket and slacks on it. Alfred, probably, since it was from him that Jason picked up the image of the clothes in the first place. But Alfred wouldn't let himself think about specifics, about the smell which oozed faintly even from underneath the flowers and the turned earth of the grave. Just blank greyness and pain inside his head, and Jason had begun to understand what a curse it was not to be able to talk to anybody awake. To find Rachael, a year later, was a blessing he still hasn't stopped being thankful for.

He could maybe talk to the Joker, if he wanted to. The line between dreaming and lucid is less a line and more a spectrum for that guy. But Jason's got nothing to say to him, and the Joker has his own Jason to chat with when he wants to.

Barbara's got her own Jason in her head, too, an angry reckless kid who they all should have tried harder with. She feels a little guilty and a little sad and sometimes there's a tiny green sliver of envy in there too. Jason's never bothered to find out if she can hear him over that other Jason. She's got no need of him.

Jason pokes at the thoughts of a dozing guard hard enough to make the guy wake up and look around and check the security monitors.

"Looks like everything's under control for the night," the guard says to himself, and five seconds later the first alarm goes off.

Jason swears. "Why'd you have to go and say that, you idiot?" he rails, moving quickly from head to head to try and find out what's going on. "Stupid, stupid, idiot."

It takes him a while, but eventually he pieces together enough to get a hold on what's going on. Lydia Templeton, the self-styled New Scarecrow, is out of her cell, and there's no sign of her anywhere on the premises. Jason moves back towards the city as quickly as he can, scanning for signs of trouble. He gets tangled up in a kid's dream about spider webs on the way, and it's nearly midnight before he's back in Gotham proper.

No sign, no sign... there. A bank's call center, three stories, full of night-shift operators. The waves of panic send Jason reeling back. There's nobody in there open enough and strong enough for him to get inside.

Trusting his first instinct, he heads for Rachael. She's asleep, dreaming about an exam she's not ready for and some weird violin-things that are paintings or something.

"Rach!" Jason shouts through her dream, loud enough to wake her. She sits up in bed instantly, surprised.

"Jase?" she says, out loud. It's been years since he's tried to talk to her while she's awake, and even longer still since he was able to hear her speak inside her head while she's conscious. It seems unfair that having to talk aloud happened just as she was getting too old for the 'imaginary friend' excuse.

"Rach." It's so hard to make her hear while her brain's active. Jason feels like he's shouting against a crowd, or wind. "You have to listen. Put your shoes on and grab your backpack, and the first aid kit."

She doesn't bother to argue or hesitate. Jason's glad that she usually just falls asleep in her clothes.

"Okay, head for Blanc avenue. You know, where there's all the banks and stuff. Wave a car down and offer them that fifty that Louise makes you carry for emergencies, to get you there fast."

"Hitchhiking?" Rachael hisses in a whisper, unlocking the front door as quietly as she can. "You're gonna get me killed."

"I'll tell you if the guy's a creep. Here, wave down that blue one. Yeah."

Rachael offers the money. "And step on it!" she says, trying not to giggle. Jason wishes he had eyes, so he could roll them.

She's more serious by the time they get to the building. "Okay, what now?"

"Go to the security desk, it's just inside the front door. Press... press all the buttons, I guess. Get as much help here as you can."

Rachael nods. "Got it." She walks up to the sliding glass doors, which open up as if nothing's amiss. She takes three steps inside and stumbles, dropping her bag and falling to her knees.

"Oh, *shit*, Jay, I feel like I just got hit by a tidal wave of caffeine or something."

"Ignore it!" he shouts. It's getting even noisier in her head and the walls of her imaginary bedroom are shaking. Things spill off the bookshelves and

onto the floor. "Rach, come on! I need you to keep it together!"

"O...okay," she says, standing up again shakily. "My face feels cold."

"That's your fight or flight instinct. Come on, just walk forward. Only a few more steps... good girl. You're doing great."

"I'm not a little kid, Jase," she manages to gasp, her hands and legs shaking so badly that she has to grip the edge of the security desk. "Spare me the encouragement."

"Now hit the buttons." She does. Inside her head, the windowpanes are beginning to rattle violently. Jason ignores the sound. "Good. Okay, Rach, I need you to start looking for people who need first aid."

She nods, and walks as quickly as she can towards the fire stairs.

"No, you don't have to go up, that's just an automatic response to feeling like you're in danger," Jason tries to say, but she can't hear him. Everything in her mind is shaking and tilting; it's like being in the middle of an earthquake.

"My heart's going to explode," she says, leaning heavily on the handrail beside the stairs. "Oh, shit. I can't do this."

"Yes, you can!" Jason calls as loudly as he's able. Rachael draws in a shuddery breath and puts her foot on the next step.

The fire door opens onto a deserted hallway. One of the elevators keeps chiming over and over, and there's a noise of screaming from behind a door on the righthand side of the corridor.

"Keep it together," Rachael mutters to herself, stumbling forward and leaning on the door. It

swings open under her touch, the lock not properly snibbed. There's a woman lying on her side right by the door, her hands buried in her hair and her knees curled up.

The lights inside Rachael's mind are flickering on and off, out of sync with the movement of the walls and floor. Jason tries to shout to her, but the wind and the crowd-noises are so bad he can't even hear himself. Her breathing is shallow and rapid.

"No pulse. What do I do?" Rachael pants. "Jason, what do I do? Jay?"

She looks around, eyes wide with panic. There's a shape outside the wide plate windows across the room, something moving out in the night. Her heart pounds and pounds, faster and faster. The woman's skin under her hand is clammy and cool.

"JASON!" she screams as the windows in and outside her head both shatter open. Everything goes dark.

Rachael wakes, sits up, scrubs at her eyes with the heels of her hands, and says "Are the people okay?"

Bruce Wayne looks away from the window. It looks like it's morning outside. "You're awake."

"You noticed that too? Weird," she answers tartly. "Are the people okay?"

"There were some deaths. Others are still catatonic. The most lucid among the survivors should be all right in time, with proper care and counseling."

"Huh." Rachael looks down at the bedspread. It's probably got a thread count higher than she can guess. "That's awful."

"It would have been worse, if you hadn't set off the alarms."

"Yeah, I'm a regular hero," she retorts, sarcasm razor-sharp. "I saved a bunch of people from a quick death so they can rot away as vegetables."

"Don't underestimate the good you did. There were security codes on the bank's intranet which had been breached. The damage could have been extremely extensive."

"Whatever." Rachael swings her legs over the side of the bed. Her shoes have been removed, and are beside her bag on the floor. "Can I have some food? I'm really hungry."

There are currant buns in the kitchen, and orange juice. She starts to feel a little more human when she's had a few bites. Less like she's a smear on a pavement in midday sunlight.

"I assume you background-checked me while I was out cold," she says to Bruce. He nods.

"What'd you get? I wanna know how good your sources are."

"Your name is Rachael Larissa Willis. You're thirteen, nearly fourteen. Your mother, Charlotte Willis, died when you were six years old. When you were ten, your father became engaged to Daniella Renoir, a moderately successful stockbroker. Shortly afterwards, you called the police and tipped them off that your father, Todd Willis, was in fact a man wanted in relation to several unsolved crimes more than a decade old. Tried under his real name, Willis Todd was convicted of burglary, extortion, and harming with intent to kill."

"Well, it was getting to be like a remake of *Bluebeard*. Daniella was a bitch, but I didn't want

her to end up as Dead Wife Number Four." Seeing his expression, Rachael waves one hand back and forth and shakes her head. "Oh, no, I don't think he actually killed any of them. It was just weird. Keep going."

"There's not much else to tell. You live with Louise and Stephen Morgan, your foster parents, and have a C-plus average in school. You're on your regional high jump squad, and occasionally enroll in a gymnastics class for a few weeks at a time. Your library books are always overdue when you return them."

"You nearly know more about me than I do." She takes a big bite of the currant bun, chews, and swallows. "Want me to start listing the stuff I know about you?"

"I'd be more interested in finding out how you know it."

She sits at the table, and gestures for Bruce to sit opposite her. "How easily do you believe stuff? Wait, don't answer that. I know already. But I'm being totally on the level, I swear."

"All right."

Rachael wishes she could read his tones better. Maybe nobody really can unless they know him for ages.

"Okay, well, you've already got my records and my date of birth and stuff, so you know that I wasn't even two years old when Jason died."

Bruce's expression doesn't change at all. Rachael decides to look at the surface of the table instead. "And I was just over three when he started to talk to me. I don't know why he can make me hear him so much clearer than he can with other people. I hope

it's not because we had the same dad, 'cos he was a deadbeat tard. But yeah. When I was little, I was never scared of *anything*, because Jay was there."

"Other people can hear him?" Bruce's voice is quiet. Rachael looks up, and nods.

"Oh, yeah. Pretty much never when they're awake, but yeah. He had to talk to Tim and Dick, sometimes, when they were in trouble. Everybody always thinks it's an hallucination or whatever afterwards, 'cept me. He'd tell me all about it."

"I've never -" Bruce starts to say. Rachael's gaze drops back to the table.

"I know. He's tried. A lot. When I was a little kid, I used to pinch myself, so that I'd cry, because he was so sad. He couldn't cry, so I'd do it for him. He -" Rachael blinks rapidly and bites her lip. "He tried to explain it to me, when he'd worked it out. It's like... you've got a Jason in your head already. A really, really strong one. And so you can't hear anything but him.

"I used to hate you, because you couldn't hear him. Couldn't listen. Jay'd get so pissed at me whenever I said that. He really loves you a lot."

She stops talking. Bruce doesn't say anything. He's looking at her so intently that Rachael has to stop herself from shivering at the scrutiny.

"He thought that one of the big reasons you can't hear him is 'cos you think he killed that guy."

"Did he?"

"No." Rachael raises her head with a sharp jerk, glaring. "No, he didn't. I can't believe you'd need someone to tell you that."

"You weren't there. It was complicated."

Tilting her head to one side, she doesn't speak for almost a full minute. "I want to help. I've never thought about it before, but after last night I feel like I need to. That all this happened so I'd end up here."

"The adrenaline made you high. You're responding to that."

"So what? Doesn't mean I don't mean what I say. I had a dead body in my arms last night, okay? I want to help. You haven't had a Robin in, what? Two, three years?"

"We're not discussing this. I'll call your foster parents now, and have them pick you up." Bruce stands up. Rachael shakes her head.

"No wait. Don't. You'll break his heart, if he wakes up and you've sent us away."

"Wakes up?"

Rachael waves her hand in a dismissive gesture. "He was giving me instructions while I was awake. That's really hard for him to do. He's resting. Sorta. But in a couple of hours he'll be back. I'd... I'd like it if I was here when that happened."

Bruce doesn't answer right away. Rachael knows she's won, for the moment.

"All right."

"And we can talk about the Robin stuff later."

"The answer is *no*."

"Can I go back to that room where I was before, when I woke up? I'm tired."

Bruce nods, and she leaves him there at the table. The feeling that he's watching her as she walks away makes the skin on the back of her neck prickle.

The bed's big and soft, and she really is pretty tired. The pillows are fluffier than the ones she and

Louise picked out at the sales last year, and make her feel like she's being cradled. Rachael lets herself drowse off. Time passes, but she's not sure how much.

"Rach?"

"Yeah, Jay?" she murmurs.

"You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Where are we?" Rachael doesn't answer for a minute. Then, with a sleepy smile, she says,

"We're home."

CONVERSATIONS REVISITED

1.

You're not gonna start wearing a costume, are you? Because I'll kick your ass to the curb if you do. Stephanie smirks, and pillows her head on her hands. They're lying on a picnic rug under the mottled shade of a tree's leafy branches. Nate's still playing with his frisbee.

Mommy! Jay! Watch me!

Jason props himself up on his elbows. *Great shot, kiddo. Smooth wrist action.* He flops down beside Stephanie again. *No, I'm not going to wear a costume. But it's cool, isn't it? I'll be an official Bat informant.*

Because it's not like you've been an unofficial one for years. She sighs. *I dunno, Jase, after seeing my Dad play cops and robbers for so long... I think the costume guys all see it as a game, no matter what side they're on. I know you know it's not, but I*

don't want you ending up on the shit list of someone who does.

I'll be careful. Promise. Jason holds one hand up. Scout's honor.

You were never a scout, Stephanie says. I bet you beat up scouts for their lunch money.

Jason laughs. Yeah. But only the really annoying ones.

2.

"It's like deja vu all over again. Once a sidekick, always a sidekick, huh?"

"Thanks for helping me out with this." She smiles and, quick as that, they're there. A treehouse full of ordinary cluttered junk.

The two boys sitting cross-legged around the 'Clue' boardgame on the ground freeze, their colorless eyes wide with fear.

"Charles, Edwin, it's time to go."

"Oh no."

"Please. Please don't."

They're both so young. It makes Jason want to punch the whole damn world. *Her* look is, of course, a mixture of comforting and stern, sad and happy.

"Hey," Jason says to fill the quiet up. "You guys are detectives, huh?"

The one in the old-fashioned school uniform nods warily. "Yes..."

"Well, I worked with the world's greatest. Seriously. If he had business cards, that's what they'd say. Want me to teach you guys what I know?"

The dark-haired one, whose jeans and shirt are generic enough that Jason's got no idea how many decades it might be since the boy died, nods enthusiastically. Then, realizing, shrinks back.

"Scared? Hey, that's okay. I was too." Jason offers a hand out. "C'mon. Easy as falling off a log."

It's the boy in the old uniform who takes Jason's hand after a long moment. "Come on, Rowland," he says to the other. "Might as well get it over with."

3.

Domino feels sluggish in the winter, but at least there are more overcast days. Even though he pretty much always stays in until nightfall, just knowing that it's sunny beyond the curtains is sometimes enough to put him in a crabby mood.

Which sucks, because once upon a time he loved days like that.

There are new emails from Greta and Kon in his inbox. They're both pretty regular in writing to him. Greta's letter is chatty and sweet; he can almost hear her voice as he reads the words. Kon's is shorter, just updates on how the Titans are and things like that.

Domino loves the messages, and can rarely help but grin when a new one pops up on his screen.

Even though he knows that, one day, they'll stop. It's just a natural part of life. People change. Friendships evolve. End.

One day, Greta and Kon will grow up. And Domino will still be here, inside. Waiting for dark.

4.

"Nice car."

Tim follows the direction of Bernard's gaze, and raises his eyebrows. He's not surprised when Bernard follows him down the front stairs of the school.

"Give you a lift home?" Jason asks.

"Drake, you never told me you had a sugar daddy."

"Shut up, Bernard."

"Got a pimp cane and everything." Jason holds up his walking stick for display with a grin. Bernard laughs. Tim rolls his eyes. It's like 'when Beavis met Butthead'. "You gonna get in the car, Timbo?"

"Man. You know, if Tim's not putting out and you're looking for a replacement, I'm told that my mouth is not without prettiness."

"Shut up, Bernard." Tim climbs into Jason's car out of self-defense. "I'm in, okay? We can go now."

"See you round," Jason says to Bernard before driving off. Tim has a moment to appreciate the car - a Ferrari, because Jason's never been one to do anything by halves - before being addressed by Jason. "Didn't know if I was allowed to talk to you."

Tim sighs. "I don't know. You're probably not. Or, more to the point, I shouldn't be talking to you."

"That's what I figured. I also figured you could do with hearing the 'life doesn't stop once you hang up the cape' speech. It's not like there's all that many of us ex-Robins around, and I don't think Dick would be all that helpful in helping you appreciate the alternatives to the vigilante lifestyle."

"Has Bruce... is there a new one yet?" Tim asks. Jason sighs.

"Not yet. I think he's got some ideas. But do you really want to know that? Think about it?"

"No. I guess I don't."

"Thought as much. So, you got any ideas about what's in store for you now?"

"Honestly? Not a single one."

Jason laughs, and pats Tim on the shoulder. "Best way to start, far as I can see."

5.

The thing is, Jason lived his whole life before he'd ever met Rachael, but she can't even remember a time when she didn't know Jason. Some days she has trouble remembering what things were like before Robin, and it's not like she's been in the suit all that long.

She feels like maybe all that should bother her more.

She's Becoming A Woman - at least, that's what Louise calls it. Rachael mostly calls it getting hips and boobs, but whatever. She kind of likes it. Sometimes, when the boys at school look at her, there's a little bit of hunger in their eyes. Rachael knows that some of the other girls think that making a boy look like that is power, but Rachael likes the power she can get from kicking a guy's teeth out or shooting a grapple into the stonework of a huge old building and then swinging up, up, up through the air better. But, still, it's cool to be getting curves. She feels all grown-up.

She never had that many school friends, and now she doesn't really have any. Afternoons are Cave time, and what lure could the mall or the movie theatre have compared to that?

"It's a lonely life," Timothy Drake told her the first time they met. Rachael likes him. He seems very thoughtful, and angry in ways she recognises, and she's known for a long time how much she can learn from the people who've gone through all this before her.

But Rachael can't even remember a time when she was on her own inside her head. In her world, lonely is just a word.

ENDLESS/NAMELESS

heart and hook

When Batman fires her, Steph sits. And breathes. And her heart pumps blood. And she thinks that she must be thinking something, feeling something, but she can't really tell. And her eyes blink, and her gaze rests on the glass case.

And for a second, she thinks she can see a strange reflection in that glass, clammy skin and knotted hair and a gnawing rat.

But the glass is thin, and after that second all she can see are the bright colors of the costume inside.

And she *wants*.

She'll show him. She'll show them all.

sword

Tim's seen war. Tim's seen people die. Tim's trying not to wonder what he was doing when Steph let go.

Whether he was punching someone, like he is now. Or dodging a blow, or striking out with his staff.

He kicks another of the dealers to the ground and grinds his boot in a little harder than he needs to against the creep's shoulder.

There's the sound of a gunshot from somewhere, and Tim smiles. Bruce once called it *the sound of permission*.

He chases it.

For a minute, he won't have to wonder what he was doing when she gave up.

mask

Bruce has had many dreams about death, and about funerals, but rarely has he dreamed of wakes. There are crowds here, wherever here might be, and somehow the knowledge is water-clear in his mind that everyone is present.

Everyone who has ever been, or will be, or has been dreamt of.

His eyes scan the crowd, anxious and forlorn as a child on a train platform. An old man in an airport lounge. Searching for a recognised face.

For a moment, he thinks he sees someone it would only be possible to see here, now. Off in the distance, a familiar profile in a sea of faces. But the boy cries 'Natalia!', and runs to a woman pale as a fairytale, and disappears from sight.

Bruce keeps looking. And then, he wakes up.

color-blur and ankh

"I would like," Del says. "To play an old game, and make up new rules for it."

"Sister?"

"A game of wild cards and birds." She blinks her mismatched eyes, and points to a boy. He is dressed in red, bright against the gray of the city. He hears a scream. "Hero time," he mutters, and leaps.

"What are the new rules, then?" Del's sister asks.

"You got to take the broken bird home with you last time, and I had mister scary green-hair funnybones. I want to trade. I will make my boy laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh."

book

"Do you think Superman's *really* from a far-away planet?" Dick asks, sorting his mother's paste jewels by color and by size.

"I don't know, honey. If he says he is, I guess so," his mother answers, and ruffles his hair. "It's past your bedtime."

"Do you think everyone there is a hero? If everyone was a hero, then you wouldn't really need any, would you? Do you think there's a guy like Batman on Superman's planet? What would he be called? Super-Bat-man sounds dumb."

"Maybe he's called Dick," Mary teases. Dick rolls his eyes.

"Mom, don't be *dumb*. Heroes can't have names like Dick. They have to make up other ones."

"There's nothing dumb about your name, little Robin. Now, to bed."

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The last thing she hears is the whine of the flatline on the heart monitor, and the last thing she thinks is "I guess your ears don't stop right away", and then everything gets heavy and dark and she feels so sad, and so lonely, and she never...

And then she sits up and screams, and Doctor Thompkins says "easy, easy" and tries to push her back down onto the bed, and that's when Steph realises that she doesn't hurt anymore, and that makes her start to shake so much her teeth clatter against her tongue and she starts coughing on the blood, and Doctor Thompkins turns to someone and says "help me hold her", and then Batman's there and looking at her like he's never seen her before, and that's when she starts to cry.

Steph can't look at Oracle, who isn't Oracle and is pacing by the window as if there's nothing weird about walking, as if it's just something ordinary that she does all the time, and Steph clears her throat and puts down the paper cup of hot chocolate someone gave her so long ago that it's cold now and says "you were Batgirl. In the real - I mean, back where I was." And it's only kind of a lie, and what else is she supposed to say?

She can hear Batman and Doctor Thompkins still talking in the other room, and mostly they're quiet but sometimes one of them raises their voice and then hushes up fast.

Batman found her lying outside the clinic, with a couple of bruises but nothing major, unconscious and dehydrated. Only there's something way more majorly wrong than just that stuff, because the

whole world has gone different and Steph thinks that maybe this is hell.

"I thought you said that you worked with him," Oracle -- Steph can't stop thinking of her as that -- gives her a confused look. "You weren't Batgirl?"

"No, I was R..." she *was*. Batman *said so*. "I was Robin." She looks down at her hands. The marks from the manacles are still there, red and swollen and obscene. Steph covers them with the blanket she wears around her shoulders, but she knows Oracle saw.

"You were tortured." Oracle says it like the words will hurt less if they're fast and sharp, like pulling a bandaid.

Steph's too tired to cry anymore. "Yeah."

Oracle looks out the window and steadies herself on the sill. In a soft, bitter sort of voice she says "It figures that *that* would be multiversal."

"What do you mean?"

"Robin... the Robin here... he had something similar happen."

Steph doesn't want to ask. She can't ask. No. She won't.

Her mouth starts moving like she's in a nightmare, like she can't control it.

"Tim?" she whispers, and it turns out that she's not too tired to cry after all.

Oracle makes a noise like someone punched her, and nods.

Oh God. No. No.

"Is he... did he die, too?"

Oracle pulls in a breath. "No." Then, after a second, she says "Sometimes I wonder if it's really a blessing he didn't."

Steph's heart goes so light so fast that she laughs, giddy, and Oracle looks appalled. Steph tries to stop giggling so she can explain that she's not happy, it's just that it's been so long since she had any good news that now that she has some it's sort of hurting her a little, but she can't stop and she's laughing and laughing and laughing, because she's alive and Tim's alive and Oracle's walking and it's not hell it's a second chance and she'll do it right this time.

She might not've been the smartest of the Bats back home, but even Steph knows how to hack into a university database. After a few hours, she's got herself some tidy high-school records and a place in the Communications program on the same campus as Tim. Trust him to get into college a couple of years early, with all that free non-Robin time and all.

He's not like her Tim... the Tim back home, if home even exists anymore. He's a bit too much like her, in some ways. That lonely look that never quite goes away, no matter how many years it is since someone locked you in a cupboard without dinner.

He's not her Tim, but he's all she's got left, so she goes up to him after class one day and says "hi".

It takes them forever of dating before they start messing around, and she's not sure if that's her doing or his or both at once, and the first time they go all the way she can't stop shaking and he keeps choking on high-pitched little laughs like they hurt him and they're both crying and clinging on, and afterwards he tells her that he was a hero, in a different life, and she tells him that she was a hero, in a different world.

So the years go by and they get a crappy apartment with no heat and then a nice little house with creaky plumbing, and they have a kitten who grows up into a cat and then they have a baby and then they have another one, and if it wasn't for the old caesarian scar and a shake when Tim's skin presses against some parts of her she'd think that it was all a dream, like some bad trip she got overdosing on her mom's pills.

She found her mom, eventually. Or the lady who would've been, somewhere else. She's a preschool teacher and has never popped anything worse than aspirin, and there're two women out there somewhere who are, by DNA if nothing else, Steph's sisters.

One evening, while dinner cooks and Tim works late again, Steph wonders for just a second if maybe she's still lying in the clinic. If she listens hard enough, maybe she'll hear the sound of the heart monitor whining.

So instead of listening, she gathers Cassie onto her lap, and Cassie says "Mo-om, I'm too *big* for goopy stuff, I'm nearly almost nine and a half!", and Steph strokes her daughter's hair and waits for Tim to come home.

WORLD WITHOUT

It starts with Tim waking up at the sound of noises from Leslie's kitchen; picking the lock keeping him in his room; and sneaking quietly down the hall.

There's a guy with a gun pointed at Leslie's head. Not like he's planning to shoot or anything, but like he wants to make it very clear to her that he's not kidding.

Tim has to hold his jaw shut with both hands to keep himself from laughing and alerting them to his presence.

"He's here because I'm trying to help him. If you take him, it may cause damage beyond repair."

"Bullshit," the guy snaps, as angry as Leslie is calm. His eyes are hard and blue, and remind Tim of his mom. Not Harley, his other mom. The one he can't remember anymore. He doesn't know how he can be reminded of something he can't remember, but the idea is so fucking hilarious he's going to wet himself in a minute.

"You're not trying to help him. You're hoping Bruce is going to get so cut up that one of his kids is fucked that he stops the whole damn game. You don't want the kid to get better."

Leslie blinks a few times, looking surprised.

"When you tried that shit in my world, Leslie, a girl died. You killed Robin as a message to Bruce. And you know what? He's right. You kill someone, that's it. No second fucking chances. Now give me the keys to his room and lie down on the floor."

Tim doesn't mean to laugh. He doesn't know he's going to until it's already out of his mouth. They both turn to look at him. He shakes his head, trying to drive the sound out of it.

"Tim, I need you to go back to your room," Leslie orders quietly. The guy holds his hand out.

"Tim, I swear I'm telling you God's honest truth when I say that I cried like a happy little bitch when I heard you killed your Joker."

Slowly, like he's moving underwater, Tim sees his own hand reach out to clasp the one offered to him. Then the world speeds up like undercranked film, and they're running.

Jason spends the thirty minutes it takes to drive back out past the city limits trying to convince himself that he was never as small and scrawny as Tim looks. It's a lie, of course -- before he went to live at Wayne Manor, he was barely enough bone and skin to be called 'scrappy'.

He's checked out timelines, and knows that Tim's seventeen, but it's hard to remember. Jason had already been taller than this kid is when Jason was fifteen.

Tim's sitting quietly but not placidly. He's thrumming with a nervous, uneven energy that reminds Jason of kids strung out on bad drugs. It sets Jason's teeth on edge.

"Aren't you gonna ask who I am or anything?" Jason finally says, because he needs Tim to do something other than just sit there.

Tim's mouth curls up into the fucking scariest smile Jason has ever seen, and Jason was once murdered by the Joker. "No. Do you want me to?"

Jason isn't so sure anymore. "Uh, well, who do you think I am?"

These streets are all too clean and quiet. There's no dirt or history, and the smog-red of the sky is bearing down, and Jason can't wait to be out of this

world. It's like Norman Rockwell was trying to paint Hell or something.

Tim laughs a little, then clears his throat and smooths his face back into something that at least looks human. "You said 'my world', so you're not from here. Your eyes remind me of my mom's, except I can't remember her so maybe they don't --" Another wavering laugh. Jason double-checks his coat pocket for the tranquilizer he has at the ready. He doesn't want to dope the poor kid up, but he will if he has to. "You don't care what I did. No, that's not right. You care, but you don't mind. You think it's okay. You got me out of there. So I don't care who you are, because what I already know is enough for me."

"My name's Jason. You can call me Jay if you want."

"You already know I'm Tim. You can call me J if you want, too. J.J."

Jason winces. "No, thanks."

Tim shrugs, like it's no important one way or the other. "Okay. Where are we going?"

"There's a rip in the universe right now. People are calling it a Crisis, but I don't know what it is exactly. But there're all these little gaps between worlds, where you can slip between 'em if you know where to look. I've been looking for somewhere to stay, and heard about you. I think..." Jason pauses his words as he changes lanes, slowing down as they pass a police car. The last thing he needs right now is to get pulled over in a stolen vehicle, with no ID and with a crazy kid in the passenger seat. "Part of you is made from me. I don't know exactly how it works, but I know that you didn't deserve to get

treated like you were dead just because you wasted the fucker who messed you up. I wasn't going to leave you in the hands of that woman."

"Leslie's always been kind to me," Tim points out mildly.

"Well, I've seen other sides of her," Jason answers, frowning. He doesn't have the scars on his chest anymore, where she saved his life all those years ago. Sometimes he misses them.

"We're going to find a different world?"

"That's the plan."

"Will I..." Tim swallows, mouth pressed together to keep from smiling. "Can I be Robin?"

"If there's anywhere in the universe left where you can, we'll find it," Jason promises.

It's beautiful. The worlds all look like shards of crystal, refracting the light into whole galaxies in the space of a thumbnail. They keep shifting, changing and darkening and flaring up, and Tim feels like he's in the presence of something holy. "Wow."

Jason laughs, not unkindly. "Yeah, that's what I said. Okay, let's find ourselves a world, Tim."

"How do you choose?"

"Look for one that looks right. But pay attention to details. I thought somewhere I could watch Babs and Bruce make out on a rooftop would be a perfect pick, and look how fucked up your reality turned out to be."

The irony tastes like sugar on Tim's tongue and he lets himself laugh, a little. Jason meant the words as a joke, after all. A very dark one, and not really

funny, but a joke nonetheless. And Tim's allowed to laugh at jokes. Even Leslie said that was okay,.

"I'll be a lot of trouble," he warns Jason. "More than I'm worth, most likely."

Jason rests a hand on the back of his neck and rubs a little, soothingly, as Tim gazes down at all the glittering possibilities. It's been so long since anybody touched Tim with anything but efficiency and pity that he ends up giving a mortifyingly obvious little shudder and pressing up against Jason's hand, but Jason just keeps on stroking like he didn't even notice.

The heel of his palm rasps over something on Tim's skin that makes Tim twitch. It doesn't feel bad so much as it feels just not-right, and his laugh stutters with surprise. Jason's hand stills and he leans close, inspecting something. The ghost of his breath on the collar of Tim's t-shirt makes Tim's eyes close, and he can feel the blood rushing to his cheeks with embarrassment. He knows he's crazy, but that doesn't mean he has to be a weirdo to boot.

"*Fuck*," he hears Jason mutter. "This is worse than the one Bruce had on him." He stands, and Tim sways a little at the loss of closeness. "First thing we've got to do when we get somewhere is have this taken out of you, okay? You've got a chip in your neck that's probably doing a ton of weird shit to your brain."

Tim begins to tremble violently. He doesn't like surgery. The Joker did.

"Fuck," Jason says again, and turns Tim's shoulders until the two of them are facing each other. "You're okay, Tim. Everything will be okay. It was a fucked-up thing that happened to you, but

it's over. We're gonna find somewhere that fits us and go there, and if the Joker's there I'll bring you his head myself."

"What happened to you?" Tim asks, and orders the contrary muscles of his face not to make a smile. "In your world?"

"He killed me," Jason answers simply, like it's the most obvious reply.

It's Tim who spots it, eventually. They've been peering at different worlds, moving through the choices, for about an hour. Jason's getting damn bored of seeing the same boring crappy world with the tiniest of variations. Nobody's doing anything useful. Jason doesn't want a world where everyone just reacts.

"*There*," Tim says, and points, like he's choosing a puppy from a pen. "I want that one."

The familiar shape of Arkham's hill crests up in the facet of the world-shard, with the same generic horror-movie branches framing it as always. But there's no hospital, or ruined remains of one. There's a cemetery.

They don't have much in the way of supplies. It's not like Jason brought carry-on luggage when he bailed on his own reality. A couple of guns, a few dominoes, and whatever else Jason could shove in his pockets. He left his hood behind. He'd been that, and now he could let it go.

"Are you sure? If it's bad, will you be able to hold your own?"

Tim makes a sound that might have started life as a laugh but got messily aborted and then resurrected

as a zombie before it reached the air. "Haven't you heard? I'm a killer."

There's nobody who could've drummed that into Tim's head except Leslie. Jason wants to go back and scream at her for a while longer just for that.

"Right, let's go then," he says. The past's over. He's done with it. They've got more important things to worry about now.

The grass is cold and dry when they land. The air smells more like Gotham should than it did in Tim's world.

They both approach the nearest headstone, this totally cheesy giant cross. And here Jason thought that he'd never see a grave less tasteful than the big weeping angel someone picked out for him.

Bruce Wayne, Beloved Husband.

"Look!" Tim says, and points to another inscription a few plots down. *Selina Kyle, Beloved Wife.*

"I guess they got a happy ending after all," Jason says, staring at the slab of stone with eyes threatening to prickle.

Tim snorts. "Yeah, because someone killed them before they could screw it up."

Jason blinks the sting away and grins. "Well, yeah. Like there was any other way they'd keep it."

Tim hears the footstep a split-second before Jason does, but his reaction time is sluggish from months of doing nothing and so he's slow in turning. Jason and Batman already have guns pointed at each other's faces by the time Tim takes the scene in.

"Jason Todd," Batman says.

Jason squints a little at him. "Tim Drake?"

Tim has to pull one of his fingers until it dislocates to keep himself from losing his cool. The pain throws everything back into sharp black and white, and the laugh which always echoes in the back of Tim's head dies down a little.

Batman glances at him, but his jaw and mouth under the cowl's shadow don't register any emotion.

"You're Crisis refugees," Batman says, turning back to Jason, and that's when Tim realises that Batman just turned away from a guy with a gun pointed at his head. That's hardcore even by Gotham standards.

"Got it in one," Jason answers. "I'll lower mine if you lower yours."

"Deal." With a nod, Batman lowers the gun. Jason gives a relieved sigh and mimics the gesture.

"There've been other people from the Crisis show up here?"

"Not recently. It was almost a decade ago for this world," Batman explains. "And the majority of those who came here left soon after." He gives Tim another look. "Come on, I'll take you back to the Manor."

The Batmobile's a different make and model, but somehow smells the same inside. Tim breathes it in so deep that he almost gives himself an oxygen high. Jason takes the back seat, so Tim's up the front with Batman.

"Great car," Tim says. Batman's mouth pulls up at one corner in a tiny smile. Tim can't remember when he used to be able to smile like that, but knows he must've once.

"I suppose we should all offer our condensed biographies, to check how divergent our worlds are," Batman says as he drives.

"Kay." Jason agrees. "As you seem to already know, I'm Jay. Second Robin, got turned into overcooked pate by the Joker, came back, jumped ship when the Crisis hit."

"Hm." Batman glances up to meet Jason's eyes in the rear vision mirror.

Tim just observes them both. He's gotten really, really good at watching people. It probably saved his life a bunch of times, when Joker and Harley got frustrated with him. He hasn't bothered to try playing to Jason, yet, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't be able to if he had to. Everyone's got a weakness.

"Hm?" Jason echoes, raising an eyebrow. "What?"

"Ra's will be very interested to know about you."

"Fuck," Jason mutters. "That guy hates my guts."

"He certainly did. But I didn't mean him; he's been dead for ten years. Talia is the Demon's Head now. She never forgave her father for killing you, and avenged you soon after."

"Really?" Jason's expression is soft and touched. Tim has to swallow down the desire to say something snide. It's not like people can help who they love.

"She's been a valuable ally. She brought Bette back for me. I guess I can finally return the favour." Batman sounds pleased. He turns to Tim. "Your turn."

Tim pops his finger back into place, and rides the wave of clarity. "Tim Drake. Second Robin. I was

kidnapped, and --" The laughing's so loud in his head he can't think. "I... shit... oh, fuck..." His mouth hurts and his face feels like it's going to split in half. "I fucked up." He can't breathe, and his seatbelt is choking him, and he needs to...

The tranq drops Tim like a hammer to the forebrain. Jason removes the needle from Tim's skinny arm and readjusts the kid's seatbelt.

"He's got a computer chip in his neck. Did you have the Hush game here?" Jason asks Batman, who nods. "I don't think it's the same as the one Bruce had in him. It looks more advanced. It can't be doing him any good."

"That's not just electronically induced psychosis." Batman takes his eyes off the road for long enough to stare at Tim. "Who *is* he? He looks like he could be your brother, but equally like I did at that age."

"Hell," Jason runs a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face. It's been a long night. "I don't know. My guess is that he's both of us."

"He was tortured?"

"Yeah. Joker pumped him with enough serum to turn an elephant. Kid kept it together enough to shoot him in the heart when he got the chance."

"You sound proud."

"Of course I'm proud. You're not gonna tell me a gun-wielding Batman like you is bothered by what he did," Jason answers. "Because if you're going to give him shit for it, then I guess we'll just find ourselves a different earth."

"Someone's got a chip on their shoulder," Batman says, and he's *smirking* at the pun. "Don't worry, Jason. I think you'll find this world very suitable."

When Tim wakes up, he thinks he must still be dreaming. The room's the same one he used to have at the Manor, but with subtly different furnishings. He pinches himself.

Then he notices that his finger is taped and bound, and he remembers hurting it, and then the remembers the rest.

For the second time in however many hours it's been, Tim picks the lock on a bedroom door and creeps through darkened hallways. It's still night, and he's still dressed in the same t-shirt and sweats he left Leslie's in. He notices for the first time that his feet have been bare since all this started.

The grandfather clock swings open like a welcoming friend, and Tim isn't sure if it's a laugh or a sob that's stuck in his throat.

Jason and Batman are walking together through a corridor of glass display cases, just like the one Dick's costume was kept in until Tim stole it. Batman's got his cowl off, and there's something in his face which makes Tim think *Daddy*, but he's not sure if he means Bruce or his biodad or maybe even the Joker.

"I had one of these, y'know," Jason is saying, looking up at a Robin costume in one of the cases.

Batman looks amused. "Of course I know. Our histories didn't diverge until sometime later, remember."

"Yeah, sure. Forgot," Jason says, distracted.

"I was quite fond of your case. I think that's why I started this collection. It seemed a respectful way to commemorate fallen allies."

"There you go using that word again. *Ally*. Don't you have any *friends*?" Jason asks, with the kind of half-mocking smirk that stops the genuine question from sounding offensively sympathetic. Tim sneaks a little closer to them.

Batman doesn't answer right away.

"Superman and Wonder Woman are invaluable confidantes," he says finally. "I think Superman and Tim would both benefit from a meeting. If Tim is a combination of the pair of us, as you hypothesised, then Conner and Lex will be able to help him come to terms with that kind of legacy. Cassandra is an incredibly strong woman -"

"- Duh, she's *Wonder Woman* -"

"- and I'm grateful to know them both," Batman finishes, totally ignoring Jason's interruption. "But none of us have the luxury of friendships anymore."

"Well, you've got us now." Jason crouches to inspect a plaque on one of the cases, and doesn't see the expression on Batman's face at his words. But Tim does.

"You'll want to be with Talia," is what Batman says. It's all so funny and tragic and mannered that Tim bites his tongue until it bleeds.

"Nah. She'll be busy, and that whole League of Assassins stuff ain't my kinda crazy." Jason straightens again. "You've done a great job of cleaning up Gotham, don't get me wrong, but there's always more work to do around here. I'd rather do that."

"There's no Nightwing at the moment." Batman's voice is brimming with guarded hope.

Tim doesn't want to interrupt, but his mouth opens anyway. "What about Robin?"

Watching Batman and Tim look at each other is kind of bizarre. Their faces are so similar, but the differences are obvious.

"I've been told that I'm a more infuriating teacher than Bruce ever was," Batman says. "You'll need a lot of retraining."

"I bet I'm a more infuriating student than any you've trained," Tim retorts with a sharp smile.

"I want the microchip removed and examined, and I want you to undergo regular psychiatric assessments. If appropriate, I want you medicated."

Tim nods. "All right. I want a gun."

Jason resists the urge to tell them to get a room.

The Cave's really different from the one he remembers, even allowing for ten years to have elapsed. The gun racks are new, for one thing. One day, Jason is going to let himself geek out completely and examine every single piece in turn. This is a Batman who knows and likes his firearms.

And it's not just the cases that speak of family lost. The whole atmosphere is of desperation and crushing solitude. Forget a Robin, this Batman doesn't even have an Alfred.

Jason walks amongst the trophies -- some old, some new - and tries to say goodbye to Bruce, and to everything that went with him.

It doesn't quite work, but he feels like maybe it's a start.

As he gets to a weird-looking chair with restraints on it, Batman and Tim join him. Tim flinches at the sight of the contraption.

"It doesn't hurt," Batman promises quietly. "If you ever want to forget what was done to you, this can do that."

Tim looks thoughtful, but shakes his head. "No. It's a part of me, now."

Batman nods, as if Tim's answer is no surprise at all. "Jason?"

"What?" Jason starts in surprise. "No way. Nobody's doing anything to my brain. I'd rather keep the shit with the good."

"Fair enough." Batman looks approving. "Shall we go upstairs, then? There's a whole world for the two of you to see."

As they climb the stairs, Tim stumbles, and bumps into Jason. The kid leans against him for a fraction longer than he needs to, like he's leeching up warmth and energy. Jason lets him.

He doesn't really remember, but figures that's what Nightwing's supposed to do for Robin.

NEW ANTIQUES

t's not like studying for school was. Or even like learning crime files.

Tim's thankful for small mercies.

Magic's more like playing with paint, or punching. The words are raw and artful as he reads them.

If depression is a black dog, then there is a hyena nipping at Tim's heels. The laughter follows him into dreams. Counting sheep leaves him smelling charred lamb in his throat.

Superman visits occasionally, apparently approving of Jason Blood acting as Tim's new guardian. He never mentions Bruce, so they don't either.

Later, alone, Jason assures Tim that time will heal even those wounds.

BREAKING GLASS

A year.

A year of "Let's talk about your father, Tim."

And "Why don't we go for a walk around the garden, Tim?"

And "Look at this inkblot and tell me what you see, and keep in mind that I'll make you keep looking at them until you stop saying 'pictures I used to make in nursery school' and start crying or laughing".

A year, before he learned to sleep with his cheek mashed against the pillow so that his screams would be too muffled for Leslie to hear. Before he worked out just how much crying she wanted. Before he found a laugh that didn't make her wince.

But he did it, in the end, and then Tim was allowed to go home.

That's when things got really hard.

They tried.

They loved him, so they tried.

Alfred made whatever meals Tim wanted, at first, until the combinations of foods became too disgusting to tolerate. Tim had hoped that somebody would get the hint that he was okay, really okay,

when he started asking for raspberry jello with anchovies. But nobody said anything.

Barbara asked what he was learning at school, and then smiled and nodded while Tim told her. Dick did the same thing on the phone, about video games and tv shows. "Mmhmm." "Yeah, I hear that's good." "That sounds cool."

After a while, Tim worked out that it didn't matter what he said or did, because they weren't really seeing him or talking to him at all. There was some other kid, some made-up person who they wanted to protect and be nice to and who they cared about.

Bruce hardly said anything to him at all. Tim hated that, but thought he'd hate it more if Bruce looked at him and didn't see.

Tim knew they were trying. He was trying, too. He made sure he always wore long-sleeved shirts and socks, so that the burn scars on his wrists and ankles were out of sight and, hopefully, out of mind. He pretended he didn't hear footsteps disappear behind the clock in the evening. He made a show of ignoring the pictures of Batman in the newspaper.

He loved them, so he tried, and kept telling himself that it wouldn't be like this forever. The right night would come sooner or later, and he could wait for that, couldn't he?

He hated waiting. But he was better at it now than he had been a year ago.

When It came, The Night, his one shot, he knew it for certain. The weather was overcast and cold and damp. Some big movie premiere was being held at the big old theatre downtown.

More than enough distractions to keep Batman occupied. Out of Tim's way.

He counted to two thousand, and then two thousand again, before climbing out of bed and sneaking down to the Cave. It had been hard to find opportunities to keep himself in form for stuff like that; he'd had to learn how to take extremely quick showers, doing silent flips back and forth across the tiles in Leslie's tiny little bathroom while the water made the pipes clank and ran down the drain.

The Cave hadn't changed all that much in the time he'd been away. There weren't any new trophies.

The mallet of Harley's - not *that* one, not the one she'd used when she caught him off-guard. Just a random weapon she'd used once - was just where Tim remembered it. It looked cartoonish and stupid on its pedestal but felt comfortingly real and heavy in his hands.

Tim had never told Bruce exactly how the Joker and Harley had caught him. Bruce might have thrown the mallet out, if Tim had said anything, and Tim knew he'd need it for this.

The crack echoes in the silence of the cavern, and he wants to laugh. The heavy wooden hammer connects with the glass of the case again and again.

Tim wants to laugh and laugh, but he doesn't. Sometimes his laugh doesn't sound right, even now, and he hates that. One day he's going to get it back to normal for sure, and then he's going to go and watch a whole damn Jim Carrey marathon. He's gonna laugh until his lungs hurt, and it'll feel wonderful.

He knew there would be a case. He's never seen it before, but it's just like he expected. It feels great to watch the glass shatter, the splinters running all directions like a lightning storm.

There are probably tons of poems in the library upstairs about how wrong it is to keep birds in cages. Maybe Tim should go find one, and write it out, and pin it where the suit was hanging. He should've thought of that before, because there's no time now.

Kicking the last of the glass out of the way, Tim steps up onto the edge of the case's base and lifts the Robin suit off its holder. His hands shake a little, and he curls them into fists. Clutching at the fabric. Red and black and yellow.

Tim balls the costume small as he can get it against his chest.

Then he runs.

His arms and legs are longer than they were last time he wore it, obviously, but luckily there was always a couple of inches of overlap under his gauntlets and in his boots.

The cape's too small, and chafes at his neck. Tim rubs at it, and feels a little bump behind the back of his jaw. He scratches at it with a fingernail, and a little black dot comes loose in his palm. Tim makes a face, and hopes it wasn't a tick. Bruce'll never let him get a dog if he can't even keep himself parasite-free.

It's not just that the collar's too tight, really. The cape doesn't feel right. It's a kid's costume, worn by someone who isn't real anymore.

Some day soon, if everything goes like Tim's praying it will, he might ask Bruce for a redesign. For now, the old cape will do.

The grapple-gun fits into his palm like it never went away.

Tim closes his eyes, and lets himself fly.

Robin's been gone long enough that crooks are surprised when he shows up to pound the tar out of them. He doesn't trust himself to laugh, but the smile doesn't leave his face for a solid two hours. The cold, clammy air makes his cheeks go red from windburn as he zips from block to block on the grapple lines, and if he wasn't trying to be stealthy he'd let off a whoop of joy.

For the first time in one year, five months, two weeks, and two days, Tim knows exactly who he is.

The Riddler's doing something lame and weird at city hall, and Tim feels sort of guilty that he never thought to keep his bantering skills from going rusty. Riddler looks reproachful and a little hurt that the best Tim can come up with for why a Robin is like a writing desk is "because they both hurt like hell when they hit your head at a hundred miles an hour."

To make up for it, Tim buys a book of word jumbles from a newsstand and shoves it into Nygma's hands as he's taken into custody.

Tim wants to hang around and ask the police if there's anything big going on that he should know about, but since the mayor was one of the Riddler's hostages there's more than a good chance that the Commissioner's going to arrive before much longer.

Tim can do without that particular confrontation tonight.

"Hey, kid!" One of the cops calls as he turns to go.

"Yeah?"

"We thought you quit this game." The way he says it, there's an unspoken *and we're glad that we were wrong* on the end.

"Me?" Tim asks, grin back on his face. "You kidding?"

Batman catches up with him a little after three. There's a couple of guys in an office across the street, and it looks like one is blackmailing the other with an envelope full of photographs. Tim's watching through binoculars from a rooftop, and wishing that he'd bothered to learn lip-reading.

"Go home," Batman says. Tim snorts.

"Where do you think I am right now?"

"This is not a subject for negotiation."

"You're damn right it's not." Tim doesn't look away from the two men. "Is a suitcase full of unmarked hundreds enough circumstantial evidence for an extortion trial, you think?"

"Robin."

Tim's throat feels tight all of a sudden. He blinks hard behind his mask. "Yeah?"

There's no answer. Tim lowers the binoculars and turns. Batman's gone.

The chilliness of the night turns warm with the morning, and Tim isn't entirely reluctant to change out of his costume when it's time to catch the train home. It's so hot that he even pushes his sleeves up

to his elbows. The scars from the burns look awful on his skin, but Tim doesn't care so much anymore. They're just scars. It's not like it's a big deal.

Gotham early in the day makes Tim think of his life after his dad went missing, before Two-Face and Batman and everything that came later. The bakeries are full of warm new bread, and almost everybody's still asleep, and some of the street lights are still on. Like they haven't quite worked out that it's tomorrow.

All the other kids on the train are on their way to school. Tim smirks. His short career as a dedicated student has come to an end.

His good mood wavers a bit as he gets closer to the Manor, and has turned into something sick and curdled in his stomach by the time he takes the front stairs two at a time.

The door swings open. Tim puts on his best 'I may not be innocent, but I sure am loveable' face. Alfred doesn't look like he's at all impressed by it.

"Once you have had some breakfast, Master Timothy, I would appreciate it if you would sweep up the broken glass you left strewn about last night."

Oh, right. The case. "Um. I'll get right on it?"

"Very good, sir. Master Bruce has asked to see you in his study."

"Oh, *hell*."

"He has also asked that I tell you to watch your language." Alfred's mouth twitches, as if he wants to smile but is doing his best to refrain.

Tim gives him a long look. "You knew. When I went down to the Cave last night."

"It has been a long time, sir, since the day when anything happened under this roof without my knowledge."

Tim shakes his head, and walks towards Bruce's study.

"Master Timothy?"

Tim turns. "Yeah?"

"Anchovies with jello? Whatever possessed you to dream up such a concoction?"

Tim shrugs. "Guess Leslie didn't get all the crazy outta me, after all."

Alfred looks a little taken aback, and Tim feels guilty. "Still too soon for jokes, right?"

"Perhaps it would be better to refrain from such quips with Master Bruce, for the time being."

Tim nods, and moves to push his sleeves back down over his wrists. Then he pauses, and shakes his head, and leaves his forearms bare. "I'm tired of pretending nothing happened."

Alfred nods. "Very good, sir."

The door to the study is open. Tim knocks his knuckles against the frame. "Bruce?"

Bruce looks up, then stands. "Tim."

"Alfred said you wanted to see me." Tim grits his teeth and steels himself for an argument. "I'm not telling you where I hid the suit. And you can't watch me every second of the day. I'm gonna go out again no matter what."

Bruce almost smiles as he comes over to stand in front of Tim. Tim can't remember the last time he saw a really happy expression on Bruce's face.

Maybe Tim'll take him along when it's time for that Jim Carrey marathon.

"I'm surprised the suit still fits," Bruce says. "You've grown up so much."

"It doesn't, not really. And I need a new cape. Something more like yours, I think," Tim answers, and takes a deep breath. "Don't make me fight you on this, Bruce. I need things to be like they were."

Bruce looks at Tim's wrists. "They'll never be like they were." He sounds like it breaks his heart to say the words.

Tim looks at the burns, too. "Okay," he says after a minute. "Not like they were. But not as different as everybody thinks. It was bad... but it wasn't the end of the world." He looks up, and knows his eyes are glittering. "I won't let it be."

Bruce rests a hand on Tim's shoulder. "All right." "Really?"

Bruce's eyes are as overbright as Tim's. "Yes." Tim grins.

FIVE THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED TO JUSTIN THOMAS

1.

The first shot goes wide, but the second doesn't, and Justin's mother makes a tiny surprised noise as she falls backwards.

Mr Wayne - "Call me Bruce, Justin, please" - goes incredibly still. So still that Justin thinks maybe time's slowed down, only he can hear his heartbeat in his ears going thuda-thuda-thuda really fast. His Mom's eyes are looking up at the streetlight and he knows she's going to blink soon, any second now, because the air here's all smoggy and it must

be making her eyes go watery and she'll have to blink...

"Justin," Mr Wayne says, holding Justin's shoulders. "I need you to go back into the theatre and ask somebody to call an ambulance for Veronica. Can you do that?"

Usually Mr Wayne's voice is jokey and friendly, but now he sounds super-serious. Justin thinks that this probably means his Mom's really badly hurt.

"Where are you going?" he manages to ask. His voice sounds squeaky.

"I have to go stop the man who did this. I'm going to come back for you. I promise."

Mr Wayne runs off. Justin knows he should go back to the theatre and get someone to come help his mother, but he's starting to realize that it's not going to make a difference if he doesn't do it right away.

Her skin already feels cool to touch, like she's been walking in the winter without a coat. But Justin's Mom always has a coat, and always reminds him to wear one himself. He forgets stuff like that sometimes.

He sits beside her and strokes her hair. It doesn't feel right to leave her alone. He closes her eyes, too, so she doesn't have to keep looking up into the streetlight.

Justin isn't sure how long he's there, but after a while Batman's there too.

"Did you call an ambulance?" he asks Justin.

"Not yet," Justin says quietly. "I have to wait for Mr Wayne. He said he'd come back. He has to come back."

"I'm here," Batman says, and Justin recognizes the voice. Batman touches his shoulder carefully, and Justin hears himself making a strangled sobbing noise. He grabs onto Batman and clings for dear life.

"I'm here, Justin. It'll be all right." Batman's - Bruce's - words are shaky, like he's trying not to cry too.

Justin's glad somebody believes that things are going to be okay. He doesn't know if he'll be able to ever again.

2.

He knows the others wonder about him. Batgirl, and Nightwing. They wonder how he's managed to end up living in the manor and hanging out in the cave without ever putting on a costume. How a kid can be Bruce Wayne's ward and not Batman's.

"Maybe I'm psychic. Maybe I knew Tim was gonna come along," he offered once by way of explanation. It's only half a joke. Back when he first got here a year ago, he was still hurting so much it felt like the world was going to end, and Justin knew for sure that if bad stuff could happen to one kid, it would happen to more. Look at Bruce, after all. Kids ended up alone all the time.

Justin knew right from the start that there would be some other kid, sooner or later, who'd be a good Robin. And then Batman came home all scratched up and hurt, and Tim was there beside him. Tim, who continually loads Justin's saved games on the computer and then messes up all the health points and inventory items before saving again, who taught Justin to throw a basketball so it'll go in the

direction intended, who understands that sometimes the only way to get rid of a nightmare is to get into someone else's bed and just listen to them breathe.

Batgirl and Nightwing don't get him, but Justin figures they will one day.

Because one day Tim's going to be Batman.

And he's going to need an Alfred.

3.

From a combination of the beginner's French they're learning at school, and code-words from their computer games, and obscure private jokes, Justin and Tim have made up a personal language. They chatter away to each other during recess and at the dinner table and when they're supposed to be doing homework.

They're making a website which proves that not only is Bigfoot real, but also that he's living in Gotham's subway system. It's not easy to sneak one of the manor's antique bearskin rugs down to the station, but Tim looks hilarious draped in it and lurking in the shadows. Justin can't keep the camera steady, he's laughing so much.

It's okay that the photos turn out blurry, because it makes them look authentic. They send the url to the Weekly World News and watch the visitor count rise and rise.

"Aristotle once said that a friend was a single soul dwelling in two bodies," Alfred says one afternoon, when he catches them trying to borrow a jug of fruit punch from the kitchen. "In your case, Masters Timothy and Justin, I can't help but hope he was correct. One talent for mischief between you is more than enough."

4.

It's been more than a week. Batman and Batgirl have scoured the city. There's nothing. No word, no sign, no witnesses.

There's never nothing. There's always some clue, some little chance thing which unlocks the whole puzzle. They'll find a footprint, or a scrap of cloth, or somebody who saw something.

They have to.

Justin goes to school and collects Tim's homework from his teachers, and says "yeah, he's got chicken pox. No, I had it when I was a kid. He'll be ready to come back to school in a fortnight, the doctor said."

Justin goes down to the cave and makes sure that Tim's uniforms are all hung up properly and his spare belts are all stocked. He won't want to waste any time on checking supplies when he gets back. Tim gets antsy if he has to go two nights running without doing something heroic. Justin can't even imagine how pent-up he must be by now.

Sometimes Alfred and Bruce and Barbara talk in hushed voices, and even though Justin never looks at them he knows they're glancing at him. He ignores it. They're not allowed to give up hope. He won't let them. The first one who dares to sit him down for a Talk is going to get a punch in the windpipe.

Tim taught him that move. "Even ordinary kids gotta know self-defense. C'mon, try and hit me again."

Justin sits at the window and waits for Batman to come home. Tonight'll be the night he brings Robin

back. They'll all laugh with shaky relief and Tim will tell an extravagantly embellished version of events which paints him as the coolest guy in the world. It'll be perfect. It has to be. Justin's already told Tim's teachers that he's coming back. Tim would never make Justin lie.

5.

"You're sending him away, aren't you?" Justin's voice echoes a little. It sounds strange. He's never shouted in the Cave before.

"He needs more care than we can give him here," Bruce answers, and doesn't turn around. He's at the microscope, examining the chip Justin found on Tim's neck last week.

Justin swallows and grits his teeth, trying not to shake. He doesn't want to sound like he's lost his cool.

"How can you think of it? How dare you think of it? Did you decide he's not good enough to be Robin anymore, is that the reason? You never kicked me out for not wanting a cape and a mask."

Bruce's body language reminds Justin of someone who's just been punched. Good.

"I'm not 'kicking him out'. Tim's very ill, Justin. He..." Bruce's voice trembles, and he goes quiet. He still hasn't turned around.

"Don't make us leave. Please." Justin doesn't care that he's begging. This is more important than pride.

Now Bruce turns. "What?" He looks shocked.

"This is our home."

Bruce looks like he wants to rest his hand on Justin's shoulder. Justin steps away, out of range. He doesn't want any platitudes.

"Justin, you don't... I know you and Tim are close, but -"

"Don't you even say it." Now Justin's voice is shaking, and so are his hands, and his eyes are stinging.

"Tim might never again be the boy you knew," Bruce says in his Batman voice, the cold logic a relief after the pain Justin could hear in his earlier words.

"You think I don't know that? He's Tim. Why can't you see that that's the only thing that matters?" The words come out in a wail. Justin can feel his eyes welling up, so he turns and runs out of the Cave. Upstairs, he sits on his bed and sobs until his lungs feel scraped raw.

"Justin?" Tim's voice is smaller now. There's no laughter in it anymore except for the bad, broken noises he can't control. He's smaller too, even skinnier than he was right at the start. His eyes are hollow and bruised-looking in his face.

Black hair and black shadows and white skin and white pajamas. Tim doesn't like most colors much, now.

"Nightmare?" Justin asks, though he doesn't have to in order to know the answer. Tim nods, still holding onto the doorframe. Sometimes he has trouble keeping his balance. "C'mere."

Justin settles them back against the pillows. Tim's face is damp against his neck. The overhead light's still on, but that's okay. Tim doesn't mind the light.

"Wanna talk about it?" Sometimes Tim does. Sometimes he forgets the words he wants and just cries. Sometimes he laughs. This time, Tim just holds on tighter. He feels like he's made entirely out of sharp angles and elbows.

"I'm here," Justin whispers. He has to be careful when he hugs Tim. Some of the burns are still tender. "I'm here, Tim. It'll be all right."

Justin knows that, surer than he's ever known anything. He believes it with all his heart.

TWO PARTIES AND A WINDOWSILL

Once upon a time, it went like this: if, at a party, or function, or formal gathering, the crowds were mingling in such a fashion that Mr Bruce Wayne and Ms Veronica Thomas would soon run into one another, a mutter would be heard from some nearby vantage point.

"Action time," one boy, or the other, would say, and then they would both move quickly toward their respective parent. Once there, measures would be taken to steer them in new, and safer, directions.

"It's like *The Parent Trap*, only stupider," Tim sometimes remarked.

"It's like Montagues and Capulets, only stupider," Justin would reply, at which point Tim would tell him off for the remainder of school.

Bruce and Veronica had once romanced happily and broken badly, now their courtesy was strained and awkward.

Tim and Justin had been friends. Now, Justin isn't sure what they are.

Now, it goes like this: Tim lives in Bludhaven with his foster brother, Dick, and doesn't come to Gotham very often. On the rare occasions that the elusive Wayne boys attend parties in their former city, Tim keep to the walls and to himself. Watching everyone like they're a species he has a passing scientific interest in.

If it's a garden party, Tim will wear dark glasses or squint against the sunlight. Justin will offer whatever baseball cap he's wearing, and sometimes Tim will take it with a smile and a "thanks, Justin. 'Preciate it". So Justin guesses that they're still friends, even if they don't talk or laugh much anymore.

Today it's a garden party, and Tim is wearing Justin's Gotham Knights cap and watching as Dick makes an attempt at small talk with Bruce's girlfriend Barbara over near the pagoda. Justin can't really tell from this distance, but it doesn't look like the conversation's going well.

"You guys like my hat?" Jenna Talbot, of the Metropolis Talbots, asks them, not bothering to say hello first. "It's from Milan. Or Paris. I forget."

Tim smirks. There's something harder about the expression now than there used to be, and Justin finds that he wants to look away from it.

"You know you're turning into your mother, right?" Tim asks Jenna. She tosses her head, causing the brim of her hat to flop in a way she probably thinks is rakish. Justin feels the urge to ask her what designer was responsible for this crime against headwear, but doubts the question would be appreciated.

"This is so *dull*," she proclaims, just in case they hadn't noticed.

"Cheer up. Maybe Poison Ivy will come along, outraged by the topiary," Justin says, nodding towards a tree shaped like a chicken.

"Oh, Justin, don't be stupid," sighs Jenna. "Anyone can defeat Poison Ivy. We need a big hitter, like the Joker, or Clayface, or *Two Face*."

Tim looks down at his feet, the brim of Justin's hat shading most of his face from view. Justin can see the corner of Tim's mouth twitch into a frown.

With a clear of his throat, Justin says "Don't sell Poison Ivy short, Jenna. She turned my grandmother into a tree."

Jenna raises an eyebrow. "Your grandmother gave a speech at a charities seminar last week."

"Well, she got *better*."

"Yeah, Ivy got Alfred with that, too," agrees Tim, looking up again with a swift smile. "Maybe it's not British reserve at all. His stiff upper lip's made of white ash wood."

"Hey, yeah, maybe Grandma's hideous hats are just birds' nests."

Jenna turns away with a 'hmpf'. "You're both weirdos."

She stalks away, hat brim bobbing with the movement.

"The girl wearing a floppy velvet mushroom on her head thinks that we're weirdos," Justin manages to say after a few seconds. "Think we should be offended?"

"I'm not sure," Tim admits. Then, quietly, he adds "Hey, do you wanna go get some fries or a

burger or something? I don't really wanna hang around here much longer."

"Sure. The canapes aren't making my mouth water, either."

They go to a milk bar downtown, where the jukebox is broken and the coffee costs a dime.

"I love Gotham," Tim muses, balancing the salt shaker on the tip of one finger. "Sometimes I forget how much."

"Ever think about moving back?" Justin dunks half a french fry into the ketchup, watching the curls of steam rise.

Tim shakes his head. "Not really. Not any time soon. After college, maybe."

"Where're you thinking of going?"

Tim shrugs, adding the pepper shaker onto a second finger beside the salt. Justin waits for the clatter and spill, but it doesn't come.

After a minute, Tim says "Hudson, maybe. They've got a good engineering and communications program there."

"Yeah? I'm applying there too. Cinema studies and media theory. We might even end up in some of the same classes."

"Still hooked on old hero movies, huh?"

Justin shakes his head. "Mostly noir stuff, now. I dunno, this'll sound dumb, but... I think in genres sometimes. Like, at cocktail parties, I start seeing everything like it's all an Oscar Wilde story, all mannered and funny and quaint. And," he scratches his chin, looking at his plate. "I realised that I mostly liked the way noir movies saw the world. I want to study them, and what they say."

"Oscar Wilde wrote messed-up fairytales. Like he was against giving anyone a happy ending," Tim remarks, finally replacing the salt and pepper onto the tabletop. "Why would you wanna see the world like a noir movie, anyway? Aren't they all depressing and cynical? Doesn't sound like you at all."

"They're complicated and difficult, yeah. But the writers and directors and actors obviously believed in something, because otherwise why would they bother? Why go to all that trouble, unless they thought a world as dark and strange as that was still worth making art about?"

"I hope we don't have any classes together," Tim says with a smirk. "You'll make me feel dumb."

"How long're you in Gotham for?"

"Just another few days. Dick's gotta catch up with a bunch of people. You going to that costume thing tomorrow night?"

"The Vreeland party? Yeah, I guess."

When Justin gets home, he gets the blue plastic storage box down from the top shelf of his closet. The lid's covered in peeling, glue-sticky pictures, from toy packets and magazine pages. He traces over them with his fingertips, remembering studious afternoons spent on decoration.

His Gray Ghost costume is neatly folded in tissue paper. Justin's always believed that if something was worth caring about, it was worth looking after, and so all his childhood treasures are preserved in good condition.

The scrapbook of newspaper clippings is beginning to go yellow, and smells like fading ink.

The action figures look just like Justin remembers them, with Batman's left elbow a little worn with rust in the joint pin, and a paint chip making Robin's nose look permanently smudged. The second Robin, that is, with spiky hair and bright red tights.

Justin has the first Robin as well, of course, and continued to play with it long after the real team had switched to the new line up. Back then, he'd hated the idea that this, of all things, would change with time.

"Everyone's gotta grow up. Even Robins," he says to himself now, with a nostalgic smile. He wishes them the best, whoever they are. Whoever they've become; these days, there's no Robin at all. He hopes they've all got as much happiness in their lives as they gave to him when he was a kid.

Carefully, he packs the box away, putting the Gray Ghost costume aside for tomorrow night.

Jenna's done up as Supergirl; the Lawson triplets have come as three musketeers; Bruce Wayne and Barbara Gordon are the Phantom of the Opera and Christine.

Justin tries not to be too obvious as he examines and appraises each person's outfit. Some people haven't gone to any effort at all, and some have gone to too much and just look embarrassing.

Tim arrives two hours after the time specified on the invitations, dressed up as Robin.

Justin grins. He'll have to tell Tim that he was thinking about Robin just this afternoon. One of life's little synchronicities.

If Tim's smirk and gaze weren't so pointedly directed at them, Justin might not have noticed that

Bruce has gone very still, and Barbara is almost the same shade as her sage-coloured opera cloak.

Justin's too far away to over-hear what they say to each other as Tim approaches, but he can tell from Tim's expression that he was banking on them being as shocked as they obviously are.

Since he can't hear, Justin devotes his attention to Tim's costume. The green tights are the right shade, but Tim's small for his age and can't really pull the look off. He'd've done better to wear the red, and to have gelled his hair up. Then, he'd look just like -

Oh.

Justin stands on the edge of the ballroom and looks at Bruce Wayne's strong jaw, and Barbara Gordon's red hair (which, until now, Justin had only noticed with the passing thought that his mom sure did fit Mr Wayne's type). They both look faintly nauseated as Tim - Robin - talks away like nothing's amiss.

Justin can't remember the last time he saw Tim speak to Bruce. It was before Tim moved to Bludhaven, Justin's sure of that much.

Not knowing what else to do, Justin goes home.

If he was asleep, the clatter of pebbles against his window would've been loud enough to wake him, and it's certainly enough to get his attention.

Tim's on one of the largest branches of the tree in the front garden, right opposite Justin's window. He's back in ordinary clothes.

"I'm more outta shape than I thought. This tree used to be a piece of cake," he says when Justin opens the window.

Leaning out over the sill, Justin shakes his head. "You know, I finally convinced myself that I'd imagined seeing Batman and his friends in that tree when I was a kid. Chalked it up to wishful thinking."

"Now you know better." Tim gives one of his lightning-flash smiles. "Is your mom home?"

"No, she's interstate for the week. Friend of hers is giving a paper at a conference. Wanted moral support."

"Okay if I come in, then?"

Justin gives a smile of his own. "You coming in by the window, or the door?"

"Well, the window's right here. I'd have to climb down again for the door."

Justin steps back, watching as Tim balances his way along a branch to the house. For a second, he wobbles dangerously, and Justin has to rush forward to offer a hand.

"Like Montagues and Capulets, only stupider," Justin mutters to himself.

"I figured you'd, y'know, figure it. When you left the party, I knew you must've." Tim sits down in Justin's desk chair. "Sorry if I've made you feel like you're in a bad episode of *The Twilight Zone* or something."

"No such animal," Justin retorts, sitting down on the edge of his bed, still dressed in his Gray Ghost costume. "I guess you guys always have to do stuff the weird, creepy way, right?"

"Maybe."

"So. You were Robin." It sounds strange to say. Like there should be a backing soundtrack. Justin

suspects he'll never quite shake the habit of thinking in movie terms.

Tim huffs a laugh. "I hate that the past tense doesn't even hurt anymore."

"What happened?"

Tim looks over at the window. "Ever hear of a guy named Dr Hugo Strange?"

"He could tape people's dreams onto video, right?"

"Something like that." Tim turns back to Justin. "Let's just say that I'd make a killing on the indie horror movie circuit if he ever tried getting in my head."

"But you're okay now, aren't you? I mean, you seem okay." Except for the way you always watch people, and never talk to anyone, and that your smiles are so different. "Is that why you don't speak to Bruce? Because he won't let you be Robin anymore?"

"You've got it backwards. *He* doesn't talk to *me*. Can't even look at me."

"Dressing up like you did for the party tonight wasn't exactly taking the high road in the argument, you know."

"Hey, at least it got him to acknowledge I'm alive," Tim says, mouth a bitter curl. "Makes a nice change."

"I'm sorry, Tim."

"No, don't -" Tim pushes a hand back through his hair. "Don't be sorry, Justin. Just... I wanted you to know about all this, to know about Robin, because I don't have anyone who does anymore. Not who wants to know me."

"I'm sure that's not true," Justin says, because the alternative's too sad to contemplate.

Tim shrugs. "Me and Barb are okay, but it's obvious whose side she's on right now. And Dick's cool, you should meet him sometime, but he's... he's one of those people who make great moms, you know? Tough love and all of that stuff. And I don't really get along with anyone at my school."

"I'm not really known for being a beacon of popularity myself."

Tim smiles, and it's one of his old, easy, sharp grins. "Guess we'll be fine, then. Hey, wanna come see the view from your tree? It's pretty cool."

Without waiting for an answer, Tim gets up and clambers out the window. "C'mon."

"This is a bad idea," Justin warns, and climbs out after him.

JUST US

"I hate those parties," Steph says, readjusting her grip on Conner's wrists. She knows he'd never let her fall, but it comforts her to feel like she's making at effort at holding on.

"I don't think they're so bad."

She snorts. "Of course you don't. You were getting a blowjob in the coatroom. I was listening to Haddie and Therese talk about hats. Who can talk that long about hats? I can't wait until I'm old enough that I can be the bitchy eccentric. And you realise that since your dad and his dad are business partners, you were basically performing oral sex

with your business brother? Incest is wrong, Superboy."

"You talk a lot when you're grumpy, Spoiler."

"I could seduce him, you know. Tim. I could steal him away from you. I've seen him eyeing my assets."

"Cool. It'd be like we're in that Cruel Intentions movie."

Steph makes a frustrated growl. "It was a book, you know. In French."

"The chick from Wendy the Werewolf Stalker was in a French book?" Conner's interest sounds well and truly piqued. "Was it dirty?"

"I hate you. So much."

Conner just laughs.

It's only a few minutes before they get to Park Row. Steph sometimes wonders if the fact that she ends up spending so much time here is the reason why Harvey continues to turn a blind eye to what she's doing. He probably thinks there's an element of therapy to it: 'there, but for the grace...' and such. Maybe there is.

Jason certainly makes her think about her parents more than she would otherwise. She doesn't know for sure if his mom killed his dad, like her dad did her mom, because he's never talked about it much. But she knows that memories of a couple of years of being locked in closets isn't really comparable to having the Joker as your stepfather.

Jason's waiting for them at the mouth of the alley. He gives them a quick glance-over, no doubt taking in Conner's missing collar buttons and Steph's cranky expression, and grins. "Fun night?"

"There's not a single brain among the whole lot of them. Except Tim Drake, and he's never around to talk to because *someone* distracts him," Steph answers, hoisting herself up onto the lowest level of a fire escape. She likes being off the ground. Jason follows, his hood falling back onto his shoulders.

"Not my fault if I'm better at finding the silver lining in those things than you," Conner answers, hovering up to their eye level. "What about you, Jay?"

Jason shrugs. "Got here early. Nothing much else to do."

Steph frowns. "Any sign of him yet?"

"Nah. But it's still early."

It never feels early, here. She's only spent any real amount of time in this particular side-street twice before, but it's never yet felt anything but far too late.

Someone, years ago, added graffiti in the shape of chalk outlines to the asphalt. Jason looks down at the sprayed-on outlines, following Steph's gaze, and shrugs.

"Sorry I'm late." Robin drops down to crouch beside them, earning three nods of hello.

"You're early," Conner corrects him, and then smirks. "Well, you're late for you, Rob. Got distracted by a really good looming opportunity, did we?"

Robin gives one of his tiny, momentary smiles. Sometimes Steph's sure that he's flirting with Conner, but then again sometimes she's sure that he's flirting with her, too.

Jason flicks a stray pebble at the rimmed silhouettes of paint. "Any of you guys ever run away from home?"

"Hmm?" Robin's face shifts, like he's raising an eyebrow behind his mask. One of these days, Steph's going to steal a strand of his hair and find out his identity that way. He makes these heart-to-hearts feel so strange, with his policy of secrets.

"Yeah," she says, before Jason can answer Robin's non-question with defensive justifications. "I did. After Gilda died. I'd only been living with her and Harvey for a year, and I didn't deal so well. Hid out in libraries and classrooms for almost a month before I went back."

"So did I."

Steph turns, surprised. Robin gives her a dry look. At least, she thinks he probably does. "Well, I did," he repeats. "Don't tell me you've all forgotten our jaunt into NML. You think I had a note of parental permission for that?"

"No, I just -" she starts, and swallows off the end of her protest.

"Didn't think I had parents?"

"Well, so far as we know you don't have a *name*," Jason says, and then elbows Robin in the ribs to take away the sting of the tease. "Hey, is that Kevlar covering your vital organs, or are you just happy to see me?"

Robin gives another momentary smile.

"I go out to Kansas, sometimes," Conner offers, scratching the back of his ankle with the toe of his other foot. "Just for a couple of hours away from my Dad. That doesn't really count, though. I'm usually back at the penthouse before he's out of meetings."

"What's in Kansas?" asks Steph. Conner just shrugs.

"I dunno. People. Towns."

"You're as bad as Robin. Secrets, secrets everywhere."

"Yeah, but I bet I'm better at seducing Tim Drake than he would be."

There's a quizzical sharpness to the grin Robin gives Conner, some unspoken question in the tilt of his head. Conner gives an equally enigmatic smile back.

"Maybe I just learned how to interpret movements, like that assassin girl we fought last month," he says quietly. Robin's still staring at him.

Steph shudders. "I still get nightmares about her. I hear Cain bought her off the black market from a voodoo cult."

"Nothing wrong with black market babies," Conner says, sounding genuinely defensive, his attention distracted from Robin.

"Oh, please. You're *so* a Luthor. Your eyebrows are all... thingy. And your cheekbones, too. There's no way your dad bought you off the black market," Steph retorts.

"Like you said. Secrets, secrets, everywhere." With a shrug of his own, Conner turns to Jason, ignoring Steph as she pulls her undercowl up enough to poke her tongue out at him. "Why'd you ask?"

Jason scrubs a hand through his hair, then pulls his own hood back on. "I ran off once. After Joker shot that librarian. I found all these diagrams in my Mom's papers. She'd taught him where to aim so that the bullet would hit the spine without killing."

Robin squeezes Jason's arm in a gesture of support. They're all used to it by now; Jason won't say a word about his family for months on end, and then he'll talk more in one hit than in the rest of the time put together. It makes Steph think of a steam vent.

"I --" Jason stops, and laughs. "I ran away and joined the circus. I helped set up the tents, things like that. And I met this guy there, and he was pretty cool. An acrobat. Smart. Like you, Spoiler, only not a snob or a know-it-all. Kind of made me want to come back and make a difference, which is probably why I started this whole vigilante thing. I didn't think of him all that often or anything, though, and then..." He pulls an envelope, bent double and furred at the edges, from his pocket. "I got this."

Robin plucks it out of his hand, pulls the letter free, and skim-reads quickly. "Renegade. He's an auxiliary Justice League member."

Jason's got his head buried in his hands. "Tell me something I don't know, Robin."

"But... they'd've shut us down by now if they really cared, right? I mean, we're an open secret, aren't we?" Steph says, fear settling in her stomach like ice.

"They could stop us if they wanted to," mutters Conner, glaring at the ground a storey below his feet. "What's the letter say?"

"Just that he wants to know he'll look out for us if we need the help. That's good, right?" Jason asks.

"I'm sure he's on the level," Robin assures him, handing the letter back. "Thanks for telling us."

"Well, your policy of honesty has been a great examp-" Jason begins to say, then cuts himself off. "Here he is. Everyone shut up."

"You were the one talking," Steph murmurs, earning herself a glare from Conner.

"Hey, guys," Bruce says with a small wave. As far as Steph can tell the difference, he looks exhausted.

She's pretty sure that she's the only one of the group who doesn't completely trust him. Robin seems a little wary, but that's more a mark of him considering Bruce a true member of the team than it is the opposite. Robin doesn't seem to trust anybody.

It's not the mist thing. Or the smoke thing, or whatever the technical term for what Bruce is made of is. Steph's seen Clayfaces and ice-guns and all sorts of bizarre stuff. Smoke is tame compared to most of it. But she's read up on the Wayne case. She knows all the details, and the reports all say that the family's only son was ten years old when he was shot in the forehead and killed along with his parents.

The Bruce they know appears to be at least fifteen. And decidedly non-corporeal, but that's neither here nor there, as it were.

"You're late to your own party. Aren't you supposed to be the one with class?" Jason asks. Bruce smiles a little.

"Here." Robin pulls something out of a pocket on his sleeve. "There was a small article in the paper this morning. For the anniversary. I clipped it for you."

"Thanks." Bruce hovers near them. If he were on the ground, Steph's sure he would be shuffling his feet. "Let's get this over with, okay?"

"Sure thing," says Jason, reaching out as if he'd like to touch Bruce's shoulder.

They all climb down from the fire escape, except Conner who floats. As far as Steph's concerned, this particular ritual will never stop feeling uncomfortable. She barely thinks about her parents, much less visits their graves, and yet here she is paying tribute at someone else's murder scene for the third year in a row.

Robin suggested they go to the graves, once, but Bruce got really quiet and asked them not to talk about it anymore. Steph thinks she understands. She and Harvey don't go to Gilda's grave all that often, and it's not like they're buried right there next to her.

They all stand around and do their best to look respectful. Jason clears his throat. Conner kicks Steph in the shin with his TTK, then makes like he's blameless when she death-glares at him. Robin looks like he's scanning for clues, like the murders weren't years and years and years ago.

"Uh. Okay. We can go," Bruce says after a couple of minutes. It's all he ever says about it afterwards, but he seems happy to have them there for whatever it is he does. Saying hi to his Mom and Dad, Steph guesses.

They all, by some unspoken agreement, walk to the end of the alley and begin a slow wander down the near-silent streets beyond. This night's always quiet around Park Row, and has been since before Steph can remember. Maybe there are old

superstitions of ghosts, or some general agreement by the locals to sit down and shut up for a change.

"I was thinking," Jason says after a minute, and doesn't pause to let Steph butt in with the expected 'really? call the newspapers'. "If you were an alien, what would be the best way to blend in? Spring Break. Think about it. Everyone's acting weird and incomprehensible anyway, right? Nobody's gonna notice if the aliens are still learning our ways."

"What you're saying is... it might be a matter of global security for us to go?" Conner asks, voice dripping thoughtfulness. "I'm prepared to make that sacrifice."

They walk ahead, deep in a discussion of necessary breast inspections. Steph hangs back, waiting for Bruce and Robin to catch up.

"What do you think your afterlife's going to be like?" Bruce asks Robin, his voice lacking the forced cheerfulness he usually uses. Steph thinks this newer, more clipped version has more honesty to it.

"Imagine a tabi boot, kicking a criminal in the face. Forever," she interjects into their discussion, gesturing to Robin's toed footwear.

"Conner's right. The book thing does get old," Robin says, giving her one of his momentary smiles. Bruce doesn't smile, and Steph finds herself almost liking him for a change.

"Hey, it's not my fault that the only thing I read before the age of eight was the t.v guide. I'm making up for lost time," she snaps, moving to cuff Robin on the head. He dodges the blow easily.

"I had a wonderful library. I took it for granted," Bruce says, rueful. "I thought I'd have more time."

You would have liked it. There was a book of Appalachian stories I think you would have enjoyed."

"I can look for it. Harvey would know how to find out where the inventory of your home went."

Bruce nods. "Thanks."

"Hey, anything for books."

"Hurry it up, draggers!" Jason calls. "You guys are pathetic. Crime's waiting out there."

"You're all fired!" Conner adds.

Steph doesn't even have to glance beside her to know that Bruce and Robin are racing her to catch up.

"Oooh, now I'm scared. Save me from the big bad vigilantes, Superboy!" coos Jason, offering a hand out to be pulled to safety. Robin dives, grabbing onto Jason's ankles at the last moment.

Steph's own fingers close around empty air as the three of them rise high above the dim street. Bruce laughs, watching the show.

HEAVEN SENT

Stephanie Brown is well and truly sick of Quentin Tarantino.

She liked *Pulp Fiction* a lot (for a couple of weeks after she saw it, Batman kept telling her off for shouting "ENGLISH, MOTHERFUCKER. DO YOU SPEAK IT?" at random crooks). And *From Dusk Til Dawn* was okay, except for that bit with the lady in the motel. That gave Steph nightmares.

She has nightmares anyway, and doesn't appreciate being given extra helpings.

Kill Bill made her cry. She likes being able to identify with the people in movies at least a little - if they're athletic, or particularly blonde and cheerful, she'll like 'em even if they're the bad guys. Seeing a little girl hide under a bed and watch her parents die, however, is closer to home than Steph's got any interest in ever being again.

So that's it. No more Quentin. She's thinking maybe she'll get into westerns next. Clint Eastwood. He kinda reminds her of Bruce a bit.

For now she's finishing up her sweep for the night and wondering how much of a bad idea it would be to have a big cup of tea when she gets home after those two Zestis from the gas station. At some point she'll probably need to sleep.

There's a boy waiting by her bike. She shouldn't call him a boy, really; he's a year or two older than her and it always pisses her off when people call her 'girl'. But his eyes are wide and scared and his face is soft looking (like prey, too much experience tells her. He looks like someone hunted), and it's hard to think of him as anything other than a kid.

"Robin?" he asks.

"Yep."

"I need your help."

He's pretty and she's not tired, so Steph nods. She would've nodded regardless, because helping people is her job or calling or whatever, but it's nice that she actually wants to do the right thing on this occasion. "Okay. What's up?"

"Well, my parents are working with this guy, and he's a bad guy, and I found out, and they were furious, and then my trapeze broke and I think I'm supposed to be dead," he blurts, then bites his lip.

"You're supposed to be dead? Okaaay..." Steph says, even as her interest piques. Intrigue! Mystery! And it's school vacation, so she can devote lots of attention to it. Sometimes life is just really good to her.

"I think they're trying to kill me! My parents! That's seriously fucked up!"

Ow. Too much like Tarantino territory. Steph pats the boy on the shoulder.

"It's okay. Who's the guy you think they're working with?"

He fumbles in his pocket and pulls out a crumpled photo. "Killer Croc?"

She looks at the snapshot and gives a low whistle. The sound comes out a little more ominous than she intended, because of the mask over her mouth. She's always forgetting how it makes her voice different. "Yeah, that's Killer Croc all right. By why come to me? There's a ton of heroes in the phone book. Some of them even deal specifically with teens and kids and stuff. Why hunt down an urban legend?"

"I... you're good at hiding, right? Most people don't even know you exist. Or don't believe it, whatever. I was hoping you'd be able to help me hide, too."

"I'm obviously not that hot at it, considering some guy with his tee tucked into his boxers managed to track me down." Her mask's good for hiding smirks, too.

The boy fails to stifle a snort. "The fact you're wearing a cape takes a little of the sting out of you insulting me like that."

"Hey! I *like* my cape." She makes it furl, just to show off. "Okay, look, first thing you've gotta do is ditch everything that people would recognise as yours. That cross around your neck is too unique. Take it off." She pulls an evidence bag out of her belt. "You can keep it in this in your pocket if you're worried about it getting damaged."

The boy nods, and unclasps the chain. "Thanks, Robin. I mean it."

"Don't thank me yet," Steph warns. "I'm calling in Batman. You won't freak?"

The boy shakes his head, but his eyes go even wider than they were. Steph can't help but notice that they're completely unfair eyes for a boy to have; big and blue with long black lashes.

"Hey. There's a kid here who's in some trouble with Killer Croc," she says into her communicator. "Needs our help. I'm where I left the bike."

"I'll be there in three minutes," Batman answers.

"Great. See you soon." Steph turns to the boy again. "What's your name?"

"Jason. You were really just talking to Batman?"

"No, I'm the second half of some other dynamic duo you've heard of."

"Anybody ever tell you that you're sort of a smartass?" He seems pretty amused, which is a big improvement on the rabbit-in-headlights look. Steph mentally awards herself a point for hitting the right tone with him. Sometimes she's way off base, and people end up thinking she's just a dumb kid, or a bitch, or Batman's tag-along.

"Anybody ever tell you that... no, sorry, I can't even think of anything else to rag on you about while you're wearing that outfit."

"I say again: cape."

"Oh, yeah, says the boy who uses a *trapeze*. I bet you know more about spandex than I ever will." Steph drops the mocking from her voice. "Your parents work with a circus, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. The Big Ring."

"You guys did a show in Gotham not so long ago, right?"

Jason nods. "Uh-huh. That's when the weird stuff started."

"Hmm." Steph files the information away for future reference. "Ah, here comes the boss now."

Batman does one of his 'ooo, look at me, I'm soooo scary with my big scary shadow, look at me loom, never mind that I don't give my ward anywhere near the allowance her angelic self deserves, aren't I just so fearsome?' entrances. Steph refrains from rolling her eyes.

"Try not to wet yourself, boxer boy," she mutters.

Jason doesn't give any sign that he hears her. Neither does Batman, for that matter. The look they're giving each other is almost like recognition. Or, no, not recognition. That moment when everything clicks just like it's supposed to. Steph felt that the first time a purse snatcher looked at her and said 'fuck, it's that Robin kid!'.

Jason doesn't look the least bit scared, or even intimidated. He goes up several notches in Steph's estimation for that alone, and she can't help but hope that it'll take a while for them to crack this case. He seems like a pretty cool guy to have around.

"What's going on?" Batman asks. Steph nods towards Jason.

"You tell it. It's your story."

"Well," Jason begins after taking a deep breath.
"It's like this..."

FIVE THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED TO THE ROBINS

Robin three.

He can't remember the last time Cass called him Tim. It's at least two months.

At least since that night when they stood together and watched the little boy who was being led away by the social worker, small sneakers dark with blood. He'd been thinking of what he knew of Bruce's childhood and Leslie's role in it, and then the memory of a small blonde girl

and a backpack and wanting to hit the Penguin until his stupid ugly face bled all over

had bubbled up. It had made him sigh, because how many thousands of images did he have just like that, too many to remember the contexts beyond a few left-over flashes. Another night, another ending, another small and wounded figure.

But it hadn't been just another moment for Batgirl. She'd turned to him, still even by the standards of her own supreme control.

"Robin."

"Hmm?" he'd replied, failing to catch that the word was not the precursor to a question or remark. Cass didn't answer. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

It had been a hard night. They weren't used to Bludhaven yet. He didn't push hard for a deeper comment.

It's only now, when he thinks back, that he realizes that she hasn't called him Tim since then.

Dana gives him a wan smile and offers to do a tarot reading for him. He nods and lets her deal out a pattern onto the small table underneath the wide window. Her fingernails are bitten to the quick and the cuticles are red and gnawed-looking.

"Do you want me to get you some more paperbacks?" he asks. She shakes her head just a few seconds longer than she should.

"No. I haven't had a chance to look at the last ones you left. I don't know where the time goes..." she says, and her eyes wander back to the cards. "These aren't right."

"I can buy another deck if you like. There's a shop in the city with tons of different sets."

"No," Dana says again, her tone thoughtful. "I don't mean that. There's something strange about... Tim, if you needed me, you would tell me, wouldn't you? Even though I'm in here? I mean... we have to look after each other now. It's just you and me."

Her chin trembles and he takes one of her hands in his. "Of course. Of course I would."

The smile she gives him is wobbly. "Good."

He thinks suddenly what a weird word *stepmother* is and how it makes him *think of black forests and gingerbread houses and magic mirrors and glass shoes and crap like that. How when people hear it they never know what it can be like, when everyone else is dead or has forgotten about you and there's only the two of you and the emergency room staff don't care about the lymphoma and they don't care about how there's*

never enough money for food and clothes and rent and how those guys came and took the television away because there wasn't money for the bills. They don't care, all they see is just another overdose and they slapped her face and snapped 'open your eyes' like she was trash, and for a bright hot moment he'd been glad she was pretty much dead already, glad, because they had no fucking right, they didn't know how much pain she'd been in, they didn't know how he'd ripped off those tires and given her the money he got selling them even though he knew she'd blow it on junk because at least when she had that she seemed to find a little bit of peace.

And then he blinks and says "I gotta go, Dana. I'll come back on Monday afternoon, 'kay? We'll go see a movie or something."

"I'd like that," she says, and looks back down at the cards again with a line of puzzlement between eyebrows that're growing out of their perfect arches for the first time since he met her.

Raven's been quiet ever since they came back from that other time-world-place. They've all been, because none of them quite trust themselves anymore. They've seen who they might become.

He knocks on her door and waits. When she opens it, he's struck by how small and frail she looks.

"Have you been eating?" he asks.

"Not very much." There's no apology in her voice. "I haven't felt hungry."

He's been craving mashed potatoes a lot lately. He never liked them all that much before, and now they make him think of

being five and a half and Daddy taking her to the carnival and buying her a baked potato and then squishing it down with the plastic fork so it'd cool off faster

think of Steph that day in the diner, and how the bruises made her skin look like smooth pale china, and how he'd wanted to wrap her in cotton wool like the shepherdess figurine his mother had.

"I need your help."

Raven nods. "I was wondering when you'd come."

"There have been some incidents. I have theories. I want you to tell me if I'm wrong."

She looks at him for a long moment, eyes narrowed, and then nods again. This time, the movement seems like a gesture of confirmation, as if she has found something she expected to discover. He wonders if it's the same thing he suspects.

"You're frightened of me," she says with a curl of her lip which is almost a smile.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You do not choose to feel as such. And you have reason, all things considered. After what happened with Brother Blood -"

He is about to protest, to say something about second chances and the past being the past.

"- and Arella."

hiding up out of sight and he knows first aid sure but what's he going to do if she goes into cardiac arrest or something oh shit oh shit Arella don't die oh shit what hope does he have if Dick Grayson couldn't stand up to Raven and Brother Blood and oh hell if only he was a praying kinda guy he'd pray his damn heart out oh shit

He takes a step back. "I'd prefer if you didn't do that again."

He thinks *this was a bad idea.*

He thinks *I wonder if it feels as wrong to her as it does to me that Donna's gone.*

He thinks *Jeez, she's even creepier than that misty girl who was in Young Justice.*

He thinks *this was a very bad idea.*

Her expression goes from almost-smiling to concerned. "Robin? Do you want to sit down?"

"That might be an idea." He eases down onto the edge of her bed, afraid that moving too fast might make him dizzy than he already feels. "What did you do? I - it's worse now."

"I made you remember something you'd no doubt rather forget."

"I'd say something about how you're taking this situation awfully calmly, but I suppose you have a different scale for measuring things like this by than most people," he says, and the words come out a little hoarse and rough.

"You're not exactly exhibiting severe distress yourself," she answers, and sits beside him.

"It's happened before," he answers simply. "Not like this, but... when I was first training. There would be moments. It was like hearing someone say my name, or tap my shoulder, but inside my head. Little nudges. Nobody ever had to teach me how to spot a concealed gun."

She nods. "I could tell. It was still there when I... returned. I did not speak of it, because I was not sure you knew yourself."

"There's a number of ways I could interpret that phrase," he answers with a wry twist of his mouth.

"No, I didn't know. I'd long ago chalked those old flashes up to nerves at being new to Robin. But now." He shakes his head, and lets out a ragged breath. "I don't know how to handle this."

She reaches out and touches his hand. It makes him think of how he held Dana's, but more than that it makes him think of how this is the first time Raven has touched any of them since their return.

"It's weird. I still miss her, even though she's right there," he admits.

"Not weird," Raven says, and the almost-smile is back. "But, as you say, my measure of such things is not that of most people."

He and Dana go see a Bugs Bunny retrospective at the downtown dime cinema. The popcorn has too much artificial butter on it and the soda's mostly ice.

"You seem better today," she says. She's been hacking at her hair again, and it sticks out in strange angles. "Are you?"

He considers. "Yeah. I talked to a friend of mine. Sometimes that's enough to make things a little better, you know."

"Good." She smiles. "Maybe we can try another tarot reading sometime."

"I don't really think about the future much," he says, and only part of him is lying.

"Batgirl."

Now that he's watching for it, he can see the fractional pause before she turns. Steeling herself against whatever painful, inexplicable, wrongly familiar strangeness might be in his movements.

"Robin."

"Yes," he answers, and stands like he
*remembers standing the first time she came to
show Cass how she looked in the suit. Palms
splayed at her sides, head tipped back a little so her
hair shone in the low light. Glittering and new and,
for the moment, perfect*

like he knows she'll understand.

Cass makes a tiny noise which would, for anyone
else, be a sob.

"Robin," she says quietly. "I... missed you."

"I never went away," he tells her. "I never do."

Watcher

The plaza is too exposed. He wants to turn and
run. To hide. The costume feels stupidly bright. For
the first time, he does not think of its colors with
unconditional love.

He stands his ground, in what shadow he can
find, and waits.

Tim can feel his heartbeat in his throat. He closes
his eyes behind the mask and breathes in and tries to
calm down, but he might as well be trying to levitate
for all the good it does.

Superman lands. "The State Department asked
me to stop by. They had reason to believe Batman
would be here."

Tim does his best not to let his surprise show.
"Why would they think that?"

"Why don't I ask the questions for the moment,
Robin," Superman says, his eyes narrowed. "Who
are you, and what are you doing here?"

Tim can't say it. He has to. He swallows. "As you
said, I'm Robin. For the moment, at any rate. I'm
here because they can't be."

He's never even thought about who he might have been without the watching. Without the thought always hovering in his mind that it's only a matter of time before he next sneaks into the city. It's just who he is. What he does. Batman and Robin deduce and fight and triumph, and he's there as a silent witness to it.

He has to divide the watching time, now. Half for Dick - Nightwing, the name unfamiliar and elegant like the clothes Tim's parents buy and which take a little time to get used to - and half for Batman and the new Robin.

The new Robin is vicious. It's frightening, but Tim isn't frightened. The new Robin simply lacks the idealism of the first, or of Batman.

The only thing Tim has ever found to give him that kind of optimism is what Batman and Robin do, and so he has faith. The new Robin will learn what Tim knows, one day.

Tim doesn't wait for Superman to ask more questions. They don't have time for that. "Why did the State Department expect Batman? Why was that cause for concern?"

Superman hesitates. Tim regrets never making an effort to know his secrets. Such knowledge would be to his advantage now.

Tim sets his mouth in a harder line. There's no use in regret.

"Why?" he presses.

"There's a new ambassador arriving today. It's legitimate. He has diplomatic immunity."

"The Joker."

Superman blinks. "Yes. How did you know?"

Tim crosses his arms, wishing that the gauntlets fit better. Wishing any of the uniform fit better. He feels like a child playing disguise games. The mask is the only part of the costume which feels like it belongs against his skin.

"Call it a hunch."

He trails Robin - no, Jason, his name is Jason when he's not in the suit - to the airport. Watches him buy a ticket.

There's a moment of hesitation as Tim reaches into his pocket and pulls out the leather wallet his father gave him last time his parents came back from India. It's obviously airport-bought, perhaps from this very terminal. There are three credit cards in it.

There's a moment of hesitation, but only a moment.

"A week ago, the Joker beat a young man nearly to death and left him to die in a booby-trapped warehouse. It's still unknown whether he will survive. The prognosis isn't good," Tim says, and tries to keep his voice steady. He recrosses his arms.

"You have proof?"

"I was there."

The flight is long, and Tim didn't think to buy a book to read. The magazine provided by the airline has nothing noteworthy in it. The cabin is only half-filled with passengers.

Four hours after takeoff, a cough makes Tim look away from the unchanging view out the window. Jason's standing in the aisle, hands in his pockets.

"Hey. I'm not a creep, I swear. I just figured, you know. You're bored, I'm bored, let's talk about sitcoms for a while or something."

Tim forces himself to smile. "'kay."

Jason grins and sits down. "I'm Jase."

"Tim."

"Bruce Wayne is still in Ethiopia with his adopted son," Tim goes on. Superman gives him a long look, then nods. He's obviously about to say something else when a limousine draws up to the curb. Tim retreats further into the shadow afforded by one of the buildings surrounding the plaza.

"Isn't this touching?" the Joker asks with a giggle. Tim grits his teeth and balls his fists inside gloves which don't fit him. "Superham's come to congratulate me. I'd hoped the Batpest would be here too."

"He couldn't make it," Tim says, and steps out into view. "So I came instead."

They talk for most of the flight. They know some of the same people back in Gotham, and they hate the same movies.

Tim stays well into the background after that, so that he's not noticed and recognized. Sometimes he loses Jason's trail, as they move from place to place in search of the woman who might be Jason's mother. Tim isn't there when Batman and Robin are reunited.

But he's there, hiding out of sight, when they meet Jason's mother. He's there when Batman leaves.

And he's there when the Joker arrives.

The Joker's face doesn't fall so much as collapse in dismay.

"No," he whispers before raising his voice to a scream. "NO! I KILLED YOU!"

Tim curves his mouth up into a smirk. "You mean smacking me around? I don't know about *killed*, but you sure as hell owe me a couple of bucks for heat packs and aspirin." He's satisfied to hear how natural his tone sounds.

"No, it's not possible." The Joker takes a step as if to lunge at Tim. Superman moves forward and clears his throat.

The Joker hesitates. After a moment, his grin returns. "Never mind. If at first I don't succeed, eh?"

The door to the warehouse is locked, but the Joker has left the key. Tim can hear sounds of panic and movement inside.

"We're almost there..."

They both look up at him when he opens the door, the terror etched on their faces changing into relief when they see that he's not an enemy.

"Come on!" Tim shouts, racing to support Jason's weight on the his other side. It's like moving through a nightmare, his legs too slow and the bomb's counter so fast...

They're barely away before the warehouse shatters in a wave of heat and noise and debris. The

woman, Jason's mother, looks down at her son's injured form in her arms, then up at Tim's face. Tim isn't sure what his expression looks like. He can feel that he's crying, and that his cheek's been sliced shallowly by a piece of wood.

"I -" she says, and then she runs. Tim doesn't see which way she goes. He's got more important things to worry about.

Superman flies them to Metropolis. Tim wants to protest, to get back to Gotham and familiar ground, but he's too busy trying not to collapse into a shaking heap. His bravado's spent and there's vomit in his throat.

They land in a side-street near the *Daily Planet* offices and Tim throws up into a garbage can.

"That was very brave. Stupid and reckless, but brave."

"He needed to see," Tim says dully, standing up and wiping his mouth. His neck feels clammy in the cape's collar. "He needed to see that he can't kill Robin. *Ever*."

"Your heart was pounding."

"I'm aware of that, thanks." Tim pulls the gauntlets off his hands.

"Are you planning to continue this? Or was it a one-off performance?"

Tim blinks in surprise. He hadn't even considered that as an option. Superman's expression is something like a smile. A terribly sad one.

"That's what I thought," he says.

Tim lowers Jason to the ground. "Jase? Jase? C'mon, open your eyes. Stay with me..."

One of Jason's eyes - the one that isn't swollen and purpled and seeping blood from under the lid - flutters.

"Hotel... room," he gasps, coughing between the words. "My bag. Compartment in the bottom. There's a spare... gotta... you'll..." Consciousness leaves him with a sigh.

Tim doesn't want to slap him, because that might cause more damage, but he knows it's dangerous to let someone with a head injury pass out.

"Jason?!"

Tim turns towards the cry, still cradling Jason's head and shoulders in his lap.

"Over here!" he shouts.

Batman pushes through the rubble, stumbling in his haste. He falls to his knees beside Tim, hardly noticing him, face uncovered and eyes wild with fear. "Jay..."

"Get a blanket from the truck," Tim says, knowing that if he doesn't take charge then nobody will. "You need to get his costume off. Put your cowl back on, or let me drive while you change your clothes. He needs a hospital."

Batman doesn't acknowledge that he's even heard Tim, but after a moment he begins to obey the commands.

"Does Bruce know what you're doing?"

They're in a park. Tim's been to Metropolis before, but never paid it much attention. It doesn't feel like a real city. It's too blank. Too nice.

Superman is Clark Kent. Tim knows he should be putting more thought into the fact he's been given this knowledge, but he just doesn't have the strength to care yet. Perhaps secrets are easily relinquished when a crisis hits. When a hero nearly dies, and may die yet.

"No."

The suit is in a backpack beside Tim on the park bench. He took the clothing Superman offered him without comment. It feels as much a costume as the Robin suit did.

"Then how -"

"Jason gave it to me."

Tim runs off as soon as they reach the hospital. It feels like a physical hurt to do so, to leave them behind, but there isn't time to worry about that.

He runs through the streets, conscious of the looks he's getting from the people he passes. There's blood and ash on his shirt.

The hotel receptionist gives Tim a key to the room without question. Maybe 'dark-haired teenage boy' is all the staff noticed about Jason. Maybe they just don't care.

The room is messy and smells like the luggage of people who have been travelling for at least a little while. Tim can tell which bag is Jason's easily, the faded band t-shirts strewn around it as blatant as a sign-post.

There's a hidden tab underneath the standard-issue concealed pocket, which pulls a velcro seam in the lining open. The bright green of the Robin undershirt spills out first, with yellow and red visible behind.

Tim's hands shake as he pulls the pieces free.

"Bruce won't be coming back until Jason does, I'm sure," Tim finishes.

"I don't know what to say," Superman says. Tim shakes his head.

"There isn't time for that. We both know the Joker's going to do something at the General Assembly. You'll have to be the one to stop it, especially if the government knows to keep an eye out for Batman. Robin's not going to be on their favorites list either."

"What do you want to do?"

Go back to how things were a month ago. "I don't know."

"Do you have... is there someone expecting you home?"

Tim shakes his head.

"Do you want me to fly you back to Gotham?"

Another shake. "No. Actually, there is somewhere you could take me."

"Where?"

The Joker's abandoned his hideout by the time Tim gets there. He's not used to the mask yet, and finds himself furrowing his brow at the feel of it around his eyes.

There's a message on the wall, left by the Joker for Batman. A place to meet. Tim notes it down, and when he checks it online later he finds it's a plaza in New York.

He catches the next flight he can get, and stares down at the land below until the plane's over ocean.

There's a message on the answering machine at Tim's house, from his mother. She's sorry that she missed him again, and hopes he's having a nice time while they're away.

He arranges the suit on his bed and stares at it. It's too big for him, the cape too wide across the shoulders and the shirt too loose.

Tim buys the newspaper. Two inches of column space on the fifth page. Warehouse fire, serious injuries, Bruce Wayne's ward. Tim wonders why that fact, among all the other misinformation, is incorrect. Why call him a ward rather than a son?

Maybe the papers know how bleak the situation is, and are loathe to use a term so difficult to unsay. To lose a ward is regrettable and tragic, but to lose a family member is something else entirely.

A corner of Tim's mind wants to know if superheroes ever complain of Super-jetlag after long distances of flight. He doesn't ask.

"Could you wait out here for a minute?" Tim asks. Superman nods. He looks almost as conspicuous as Clark Kent as he would as Superman, there in the hospital corridor. Clean and fresh, as if sickness and injury have nothing whatsoever to do with his personal world.

"Of course."

Tim gives a short nod, and pushes the door to the private room open.

Bruce Wayne is asleep in a chair beside the bed, palm resting on the sheet over Jason's leg. Tim pulls the other chair around to the other side of the bed, beside the respirator. The stitches and dressings on

Jason's face make the injuries even more shocking to look at, somehow.

After a second's hesitation, Tim takes Jason's hand. He can almost pretend that the boy's just asleep, same as Bruce is. 'Comatose' sounds like such a soap-opera word.

"Uh, hi," Tim says quietly. "I... Dick's somewhere with the Titans. I don't know how to reach him. And you're here. So I'm going to hang onto the suit. There needs to be a Robin right now, so the Joker gets the message that he can't win." Tim looks over at Bruce. Even in sleep, the man looks stricken. "Batman's going to need Robin, especially if... if you don't wake up. I think he needs *you*, too, and I can't be you, but maybe I can be Robin. For a little while."

The respirator hisses, and the monitors hum.

Tim sits, and feels the weight of Jason's palm on his own, and pretends that everything is going to be all right.

That Jason is just sleeping, like Bruce, and that Tim is simply doing what he's always done best.

Just watching.

Now We Are Two

It's almost two months since the Joker nearly shot him, and Dick's starting to worry.

Danger is hardly a new thing for him, and the novelty factor in being confronted with his own mortality wore off long ago. But, for some reason that Dick can't fathom, Bruce has taken this particular incident extra-hard.

Dick's tried telling the Titans about it. About the quiet, and the additional training, and the fear that

he knows is behind the sharp, curt tones Bruce has been speaking in. The Titans think Batman's a big scary freak anyway, though, so they're not much help.

Sometimes Dick wishes that there was someone who understood what stuff like this was like. Alfred's cool, but mutual whining isn't really a feature of the relationship Dick has with him.

Bruce is looking at Dick with yet another worried, thoughtful expression. They're at the table, and the table is set for breakfast, but neither of them have eaten anything yet.

They're supposed to be doing a Bruce-Wayne's-largess-to-the-community photo-op at an experimental school in the lousy part of town this morning, and Dick know Bruce likes to stay around that same area for patrol on this night of the year. It's the anniversary of the night Bruce's parents died.

Maybe that's what's got him so worried; he's scared of losing Dick as well.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Dick asks, desperate to break the quiet.

Bruce blinks, as if he's surprised at being spoken to.

"C'mon, you've been stewing for weeks now."

Bruce smiles a little. "I'm sorry if it's been annoying."

"Don't be sorry, just... what's in your head? You've been giving me these looks, like..." Like you want to lock me in a cellar underneath the house so I can't get hurt.

Except, of course, underneath their house is the Cave.

"I've been thinking," Bruce says, and doesn't meet Dick's eyes, and Dick's stomach becomes a knot. No, no, he can't. "That Gotham's moral climate has shifted since the time Batman and Robin were a suitable defense."

"You're firing me?" The outrage and incredulity that the words held inside Dick's mind get lost in translation from thought to speech, and the question comes out as a betrayed keen.

Bruce looks up sharply, shocked. "No! Never, Dick. You have my word."

And just as quickly as the world fell apart, it rights itself. Dick breathes out in relief. "Oh. Okay. Good."

"No, my thoughts were along the lines of -" Bruce pauses. "Expansion."

"You want to make Babs a full-time member of the team?" Dick asks as he pours milk over his cereal, his appetite returned.

"I considered it, but I don't think it would suit her. Or us." Bruce gives him a pointed look.

"Hey! I can work alongside gorgeous girls and keep my mind on the job!" Dick sits back and crosses his arms, mildly offended. Then, the moment passing, his tone becomes more serious. "This is because of the Joker, isn't it? When he nearly shot me."

Bruce nods. "Yes."

"Thought so. But, hey, it worked out okay, right? When the fight's 'Joker vs. Robin', don't put your money on the green-haired loony."

Bruce smiles, but Dick can see the deep terror still lurking in his eyes.

They've been at Ma Gunn's School for Boys for all of ten minutes when Dick starts to smell a rat. There's something off about the way they boys talk, the same combination of fear and respect and self-satisfaction that Dick's more used to hearing from mob lackeys. The classroom looks ordinary enough, but that's wrong too because it's not an ordinary school. A row of pristine and expensive textbooks that look like they've never been touched, much less studied, sits on a beat-up shelf beside the blackboard.

"There's something wrong here," Dick says to Bruce quietly as they're led into the dining hall. Dick half-expects it to smell of gruel. "I think these kids are in danger."

Bruce nods, his face keeping its affable and charming smile as his eyes narrow a fraction.

"We'll come back later?" Dick guesses. Bruce nods again.

Sorting out the school takes them an hour that evening, and Dick's glad he noticed that it was crooked. Keeping Bruce's mind off his parents and off his concerns for Dick seems like the best thing to do.

They head back to the car, the streets empty and almost eerily quiet. Nobody wants to mess with Batman tonight.

The car is...

Dick starts laughing so hard that his eyes tear up behind the mask.

"Robin, what -" Bruce starts to say, and he notices the fact that two of the Batmobile's tires are gone, and starts to laugh too.

"Well, they're brave, you've got to give them that," Dick offers, and shakes his head. "I don't know about you, but I'm impressed."

"Shh," Bruce says suddenly. "Someone's coming back."

Dick nods, and the two of them blend back into the shadows under a fire escape overhang.

A teenage boy, dressed in too-small clothes and with a pinched, scrappy look to his face, walks up to the car and begins to work at the bolts of the third wheel with a tire iron.

Dick flips up, landing in a crouch on top of the front of the car.

"Aw, hell," the boy says, standing and swinging out with the tire iron. Dick dodges the blow, dropping down onto the pavement to loom above the boy as best he can.

"We'd like our tires back, kid."

"Try and catch me, then," the boy taunts, and darts off down the narrow street.

Dick calls "It's fine, I've got it," over his shoulder as he gives chase. The boy's fast, that's for sure. Agile, too, climbing up a rickety and rusting-through ladder with an ease Dick's rarely seen even from the costumed teens he's worked with.

Dick stays out of sight as the boy reaches a window several stories up on an abandoned building. He looks back and forth and, obviously satisfied that he's lost his pursuers, climbs inside.

Dick waits thirty seconds and then follows. The hallway smells like plaster that's been too-long damp and cigarette smoke and motor oil. A staticky radio plays rock music from behind one of the closed doors.

Inside, the boy is sprawled on a mattress on the floor, flicking through a skin magazine and smoking what Dick's willing to bet is a butt scrounged from an ashtray.

"*Jee-zus*," the boy says when he sees Dick.

"Nope. You swipe his tires, too?"

The room smells even worse than the hallway did. Like sickness and rot and canned food and cheap alcohol.

"Listen, I got friends in high places. If I go missing, you'll -" the boy stammers, eyes darting towards where the tire-iron rests atop a pile of tires. Then, the feeble protests trailing off, the boy just looks scared. "Don't hurt me."

"Is this where you live?"

The boy's chin tilts up again, proud and furious. He stands up and crosses his arms, looking Dick straight in the eye. "Yeah, and what of it? It's mine, and I like it."

"What about your parents?"

"My Dad's in jail. My mother..." The boy's lips press together in a hard line. "She got sick. What the hell's it to you, anyway?"

"What's your name?"

The boy opens his mouth, as if he's about to answer, and then dives for the tire iron. Dick jumps out of the way of the first hit, but the boy kicks out with one of his ratty sneakers and connects with Dick's shin, hard, at the same moment as his fist hits Dick's cheekbone.

The blow is surprisingly powerful, more than Dick would have expected the boy to be capable of. Dick strikes in below the ribs with the edge of his hand and hooks his foot behind the boy's ankle,

knocking him down against the filthy floorboards and pinning him there with a forearm under his chin.

"I'll ask again. What's your name?"

"Jason," the boy says with a glare, struggling to wriggle free. "Jason Todd."

"Wanna gimme back my tires, Jason Todd?"

"Wanna make me?" Jason mimics Dick's tone, sneering.

"Think I'm already doing that, kid," Dick points out conversationally, increasing the pressure against Jason's throat a little.

"Okay, okay, fine. Take your stupid tires."

"Help me get them back to the car," Dick orders. Jason looks furious and humiliated, but nods.

"You go to school?"

Jason barks a laugh. "What do you think, costume boy?" He lets the tire he's rolling bounce a few steps down before he catches it again.

"So, what, you rip off tires and read porn and smoke? Sounds like a lousy life."

"Fuck you."

"You're a good fighter."

"People leave you alone if they know you're tough. It's easy to make people scared of you if you know how," Jason mutters.

"And then they leave you alone."

"You like being alone?"

"It's better than getting messed up in the deals going on around here. I'm no crook."

Dick clears his throat and gestures to the tires.

"Fuck you, I'm not. I just do what I have to. Only time I even pick a fight is when someone tries to

make life tough for the girls and guys around here who're doing what they have to." Jason scowls at the ground, as if it's done him a personal wrong. "There. You've got your stupid tires. Now take 'em and go."

"Wait. There's someone I want you to meet first." Dick grabs Jason's upper arm as the boy turns to leave.

Bruce is still waiting by the car, and seems unsurprised when Dick returns with company.

"You took your time," Bruce remarks, looking Jason up and down. Dick shrugs.

"Our new friend isn't the most cooperative soul." He gestures to the bruise he can feel rising on his cheek.

"So are you gonna kill me, or hand me over to child services?" Jason's voice almost masks his fear under the gruffness. Almost.

"He needs a home," Dick explains. "And he's got a fine right hook."

"And 'he' has a *name*," Jason snaps.

"Are you sure about this?" Bruce asks Dick.

"Nope," Dick answers cheerfully. "That's why I'm asking your opinion."

"What the hell are you two talking about?"

Bruce looks at Jason. "What's your name, son?"

"Jason." Jason's lip curls into a smirk. "What's yours?"

"Bruce," Bruce answers.

Dick grins.

Identity Crisis

"Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Sue Dibny's dead."

Tim nearly drops the phone. "*What?*"

"It's been all over the news."

Craning his head around the doorframe, Tim sneaks a peek into the living room. His father and Dana are still watching an old movie. He hopes they don't change the channel until he's elsewhere. "What happened?"

"Murder. I don't know the specifics. Can we meet at the diner?"

"Sure. See you soon, Steph."

Tim presses the off button on the cordless handset and returns it to the receiver, heading into the living room. "That was Steph. She just got her GED results and she wants to celebrate how good her scores were. Can I go meet her for ice cream?"

After a moment his father nods. "Don't be out too late."

Steph's in the corner booth, dressed in black jeans and the oversized dark blue hoodie she only wears when she's feeling extra-lousy. She stands when she sees Tim approach and hugs him tight. He can feel a new hardness of muscle in her arms even though it's only three days since they last met up. He wonders if his own limbs feel soft and weak to her.

"I wish they hadn't ditched the TV over the counter here," Steph says, her voice a little thick. "Mom was still watching when I left. I could tell she was gearing herself up to another big Talk about me. With me. Whatever."

"Does she know...?"

Steph shakes her head. "No."

They don't talk about it if they can help it. He's only seen her in the costume once, on the night five weeks ago when she came to his window and bit the bright lipstick off her lip to keep from crying.

Tim stroked the pressure point on the lefthand side of the mask, just below the corner of the eye, sliding the lenses back from Steph's eyes. She blinked, surprise fading quickly into understanding as like recognized like.

"He's doing it again," she'd said shakily. "Telling me to quit. I don't know... I mean, how..."

"Shhh," Tim smoothed her wind-knotted hair with his palm. "It's okay, Robin."

There were catches and clasps on her armor that were different from what he'd worn. They both trembled as their hands found skin, and hardly made a sound between them. Perhaps they'd been unsure what names to whisper.

"It didn't work the other thousand times he tried it, why should this be any different?" she'd said the second time they'd talked about it. They were in Tim's room again, so Steph could use his computer to look at the files she'd copied from the Cave's mainframe and Tim could pretend to have no idea what she was up to. "Maybe he'll clue in some day that firing me isn't getting the point through."

"Hmm." Tim was looking at his history textbook and thinking about how Steph tasted.

"Have you seen these? They're, like, war plans... or war games, I can't tell. D'you think, if I pulled one off, he'd take me back?"

Tim looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"Okay, okay." Steph ejected the disc and moved on to the next one. "Learn to spot a joke when you see one in the wild, hey?"

Tim put his textbook aside and sat up. "Have you been contacted yet?"

"You mean, have I been cornered and scolded and had the Robin suit confiscated? Nope."

"Ixnay on the Obinray," Tim shushed her. His Dad and Dana were out, but Tim wasn't taking any chances.

"I'm sure your parents can crack your intricate code there," Steph retorted. "No, I haven't. I saw Cass night before last, and I'm sure she saw me, but she's obviously not telling. Same with Oracle, I guess. It seems to me like this is all another stupid screwy test. I want to know how many he'll put me through before he gets over himself."

"Don't hold your breath," suggested Tim.

Now, they clasp hands across the table.

"When I was a kid," Steph whispers. "I'd make my friend Stacy be the girl in peril in all our games. I was Superman, or Green Lantern, or the Flash, or, yeah, even Elongated Man a few times. And Stacy was in danger, and I'd save her. That's how the game *worked*."

He wants to tell her things will be fine.

"I know," Tim says.

When Tim gets home from talking to Steph at the diner, his Dad hugs him tight and calls him son and offers thanks to God that Tim's out of 'all that'.

He wants to call Kansas. He's reached for the phone

at least two dozen times over the past couple of days.

Kon will be busy. He won't have time to listen to well-meaning platitudes from someone no longer relevant.

Tim wants to call Dick. He wants to call Bruce.

When the evening news has a special report about a second attack, Tim calls Cissie.

"Cissie here."

"Hey. It's Tim."

"Tim!" Cissie sounds extremely surprised and very pleased. "Cassie told me what happened. I'm glad to hear from you. Mostly the only times I hear from the old crowd are Conner's periodic calls to bitch me out for giving him no excuse to call. He's got some issues."

"Don't we all. Cis, I called because... there's been another attack. Jean Loring."

Her gasp comes down the line as a burst of static. "Oh... is she alive? Is she okay... Oh, I can't..."

"She's alive. The news said she's stable. I thought you deserved to hear it from a friend."

"Thanks. I'm... I can't believe it."

Tim knows there are not many women Cissie has known whom she actually trusts. Dr Money is dead, Bonnie is unstable at best. Jean had fought to keep Cissie in the only home the girl had ever known and, though the attempt had proved unsuccessful, Cissie had not forgotten Jean's effort.

"Cassie will be able to give you more information," Tim reminds Cissie.

"Do you want me to tell her you called?"

He wants to say yes so much that his throat hurts.

"Best if you don't," he answers.

Time crawls. It feels like breakfast takes an hour. School is a century. After classes are done for the day, Bernard and Darla drag him out for ice cream sodas.

"You look like someone's just told you that Star Wars isn't really real, my man," Bernard says.

"Blasphemy," Tim replies, and orders a Sprite with no ice.

"I'm gonna go choose some tunes." Bernard brandishes a coin and heads for the jukebox on the far wall.

"I'm sorry I hit on you," Darla says when they're alone. "I should have believed you when you said you had a girlfriend."

"Oh?" Tim hazards.

"Wanna know why I believe you now?"

Tim wonders if he's allowed to answer no. "Hmm?"

Darla leans in, conspiratorial. "Girls can tell when a guy's done it."

"Oh?" Tim says again, and wonders if he'll spontaneously turn invisible any time soon. He's wishing pretty hard for it, after all.

"It's okay. I've got my eye elsewhere." Darla nods toward the jukebox. Tim turns just in time to see the lingering look Bernard gives the waiter bringing their drinks over, and does his absolute best not to splutter with laughter. Luckily, his face doesn't do any more than smirk.

"Guess who I caught, cuffed, and carcerated this evening?"

Tim leans his head to one side so he can hold the phone against his shoulder as he helps Dana chop vegetables for dinner.

"Carcerated?"

"It means the same thing as *incarcerated*. Like flammable and inflammable, duh."

"That's... right, okay, fine. Who?"

"Captain Boomerang! Is that cool or what? He had tons of concealed weapons and everything. I rock."

"I wonder why he was in Gotham," Tim muses. Dana stills his hand and turns the carrot he's chopping so that he's slicing a different way.

"Who cares? Maybe he's hoping a spot'll open up in Arkham."

"Hang on a sec." Tim holds the mouthpiece against his shirt. "Can I invite Steph for dinner?"

"It's fine with me, but you'd better check with your Dad. It'll be ready in a little over an hour."

Tim nods, and goes into where his Dad's watching TV. It seems like they've had the news on nonstop for the past few days.

"...witnesses claim the arrest was made by Robin, Gotham's fabled teen vigilante. Contrary to the usual Robin rumors, bystanders claim that this masked do-gooder was a young, blonde woman. Back to you in the studio, Laura."

Tim backs out of the room very quietly. "I'll meet you at the diner soon," he says to Steph, taking the stairs two at a time. "Wait for me if I'm late."

"Sure, but what's -"

Her words are cut off as Tim switches the phone off and tosses it onto his bed. He knows there's nothing incriminating in his room, but initiates a

wipe on his hard-drive and checks under his bed anyway.

"Tim."

"Hi Dad, what's up?" His smile feels too broad and fake, but he leaves it on anyway.

"Is your girlfriend one of *those people*?"

"What people, Dad?" Tim lets his smile fade and a line of confusion appear between his brows.

"Don't play that game with me. Is. She. Robin?"

"Huh? Dad, *I* was Robin. I stopped. I promised, remember? Why would I hang out with a new one? Why would Batman take a new one?"

Tim's Dad doesn't look placated. "The news said Robin's a woman with long blonde hair."

Tim makes himself laugh. "Well, there you go. Steph cut her hair, remember? You said it made her look sophisticated."

"She hasn't... grown it back?"

"Dad, you saw her a fortnight ago." Tim prays his father's habitual obliviousness is still in peak condition. When his Dad's expression shifts from angry to unsure, Tim grabs the lifeline and goes with it. "Actually, I was just talking to Steph before you came in. She borrowed a CD off me and it belongs to Bernard at school. You remember Bernard, right? And Bernard wants it back tomorrow, so I was going to bike down to the diner to see Steph. I'll be back for dinner, I promise."

"You've been spending a lot of time with her. I'm not sure -"

"I'll tell her you said hi. She's always saying how cool you guys are. She has a lot of respect for the way you've brought me up."

It's a little white lie. Tim's told much bigger ones with a straight face. His father smiles.

"Oh. Well. Yes, go. Be back for dinner."

"Thanks, Dad." Tim allows himself to be hugged before he escapes from the room.

Steph's playing with the sugar dispenser and humming to herself when Tim arrives. She grins broadly and stands to kiss him on the cheek.

"My mom's on late shift if you want to come by tonight. I went to the drugstore and bought extra condoms."

Steph has taken to claiming that it's been so long since the last time she had sex before these last weeks that her virginity grew back, but Tim's just glad that at least one of them can think about it without getting flustered.

"I'd like that," he manages now, settling into his seat and pointedly not thinking about what a limited view of the room its position provides him with. "It might be kinda late. My Dad's... you know."

Steph nods. "'kay. I'm still pepped up from taking down... well, not a big name, but at least as big as the Cluemaster ever was."

"I remember what it's like."

"Yeah? So how come I never got lucky after you bagged a big one?" The teasing is gentle; Steph knows the wounds are still tender. "How was your day?"

Tim grimaces. "Long. Boring. Frustrating. Embarrassing."

"I'll make it alllll better." Steph's smirk is as good as a promise. Then her face changes to surprise and

no small amount of fear, gaze fixed on the door into the diner.

Tim turns to see what's going on, and does his best not to react with jaw-dropped shock.

Bruce is approaching their table.

Steph puts the strap of her bag over her shoulder, preparing for a quick exit. Tim, irrationally, glances around to make sure that his father hasn't slipped in unannounced.

"It's all right, Stephanie. Sit down," Bruce says as she stands to leave. "I trust my files made interesting study?"

He sits down next to Tim, who thanks a lifetime of dedicated mental compartmentalization for the easy switch from thinking about sex to thinking about the mission.

Steph glares and crosses her arms over her chest. "If this was all an elaborate scheme to get me to do homework, I'm selling your secrets to the tabloids."

Tim wonders for a moment how she can let the past go so easily, before he remembers that this is hardly the first time Robin or Steph has forgiven Batman for this sort of situation.

"No, that wasn't the reason," Bruce assures her. Tim does his best to get a good look at Bruce's face without obviously staring, which isn't easy when they're on the same bench in a small diner booth.

Even without seeing the expression for confirmation, the tone in Bruce's voice is eerily familiar. Tim remembers it from the earliest days of his own training.

Don't be Jason, that tone says. Please.

"I was reminded of concerns I harbored," Bruce goes on. "Concerns which you have since given me ample reason to set aside."

"Caught the news, huh?" Steph unfolds her arms and gives them both a fierce smile. "Like I was saying to Tim, I rock."

Bruce turns to Tim. Tim swallows and offers a shaky grin. "Hi. How is -" Everyone. The life I used to have. "How're you?"

"I've rarely felt the lack of an assistant more than these past few days, let's put it that way." The voice is jokey and light, but the look Bruce gives them both is sharp and honest.

"Wish I could help you out," Tim says ruefully. "But I hear the new girl rocks, so that's all right."

Bruce turns, speaking mostly to Tim. "These recent times have reminded me of how risky it is for people like me to form outside ties -"

Tim looks down at the table and begins to fiddle with the same sugar dispenser Steph was playing with.

"- and how important those ties can be in making life worthwhile," Bruce continues. "I will never ask you to go against your father's wishes, or your own, but -"

Tim looks up again. "Lucky for you, Dad's yet to master the concept of email. Drop me a line any time you like." He checks his watch. "I better get home now, though, or Dana will grow claws and fangs. Stepmothers do that if you skip dinner. Strange but true."

Bruce stands to let Tim slide out of the booth. Steph stands too, and clasps Tim's hand for a few seconds. "See you later?"

He nods. "Like I said, I might be late."

"Yeah, well, me too." Steph looks up at Bruce. "I think I'm busy for at least the next few hours."

Bruce gives a small nod. Steph's smile is so bright Tim finds he has to turn away from it. Then he steels himself, and turns back. "Tell everyone I said hi." He hesitates. "And... I miss them."

Steph squeezes his hand again. Bruce rests a hand on his shoulder.

Tim knows he has to go home. Dinner'll be ready soon, and his Dad will be watching the TV and getting worried, and there's a trig test tomorrow.

But for now, he just stays where he is.

Interlude: Five things that never happened to Caroline Kelley.

i. Returns

"What's your name?" the man - the *Batman* - asks. He's probably in a lot of pain.

The car's not exactly quiet, and Carrie's kinda surprised at how easily she can hear him. Maybe she's listening real hard.

"Carrie," she answers. "Carrie Kelley."

Then she pauses. No, that's not right. It used to be right. Now, she's someone else. "Robin," she amends.

"Mine's Jason," Batman answers her.

She's in the Cave. The *Bat* Cave. Carrie wonders if this weird not-all-the-way-awake feeling is how Mom and Dad feel when they're high. If it is, she gets why they do it so much. It's like every good dream and every nightmare she's had all at once.

She's looking at the glass case with the Bat suit inside it. She knows she must look kinda gawpy, but it's difficult not to be. Batman can *die*. Batman *has* died. And he's come *back*.

There's a sound behind her, a quiet throat-clearing. Carrie turns. Jason's there, looking beat up and bruised and exhausted.

She jumps at him and clings on tight, tighter than she's ever hugged anybody 'cept that stupid old bear she used to have.

After a moment, Jason gives a soft little sigh and hugs her back. Just as tight.

ii. *Tomorrow*

The training's tough. Carrie's not so good at the guns as Tim would like her to be. She's doing her best.

She saw a newspaper the other day. Her parents are in jail. She knows Tim did that, to see if she was tough enough. She's surprised he didn't kill them.

Her suit's heavier than she'd like. The lenses in her mask are made to the same prescription as the glasses she used to wear at school.

Carrie doesn't go to school anymore.

Last night she stopped three guys who were about to rape a girl who was the same age as Carrie. None of them are ever going to have children, by any definition of that phrase. The girl sobbed and said "thank you, Robin" about a million times. Carrie gave her a pill to stop shock and hysteria taking hold and sent her home in a cab.

Tim told her she'd done good work. He didn't call her Robin. He never calls her Robin.

iii. *Beyond*

"Aw, c'mon, I bet you used to go out dancing all the time when you got off patrol."

Terry gives a long suffering sigh. "Not when I had a sprained ankle and a broken arm."

"Give it up. 'Possible hairline fracture' is not the same as a broken arm. And nobody moves their feet when they're dancing anymore, get with the times." Carrie glares. "You owe me three weeks' allowance, too."

The next time a supervillain tries to resurrect Bruce Wayne, Terry's going to let them do it. That way, he'll have a chance to shake the man and ask why, in the name of all that's rational, was a precedent set for Batman's dealings with athletic, bright orphans with nowhere to go?

"Robin," Terry says in a voice he usually reserves for when they're in-costume. "You aren't going anywhere. Your allowance will be transferred into your account first thing in the morning. You can train with the Clayface simulation for the rest of the night." He knows it's her favourite.

Her face lights up. "*Really?* Aces. Ter, you're the best boss I've ever had."

"I'm the only boss you've ever had, Carrie."

"Which is how come I can say you're the best and worst and not be telling a lie either way," she points out happily, and runs off to start the training program.

iv. *Strikes Again*

She's going to have some totally gross scars on her face. Carrie never thought she'd be the kind of person to think about plastic surgery, but she knows

that it'll freak Bruce out if she leaves herself looking so beat-up. It'll remind him what happened.

Carrie kind of likes the idea of reminding him.

She didn't want to recover in some private secret hide-out. She wanted a real bed in a real hospital with real doctors and nurses, and she got it. It's amazing what people'll say yes to when you're nearly dead.

Her private room has a view of the gardens outside. The old lady from the psych ward who screams in the night is always walking laps around the flower beds. Carrie likes to watch her. The routine's soothing.

A man named Tim Drake's been by to see her twice. First time, he brought a photograph of a boy she never knew.

"Jason Todd," he said, and his tone told her everything she needed to know. She's a detective, after all.

"You and him were..." She felt her lip curl in disgust. He flinched.

"Yes." He didn't sound like he was ashamed. He's a detective too, with a private firm in the city. He gave her his card.

"Bruce never said Jason was... like that."

"Bruce never knew," Tim answered.

The second time was yesterday.

"I thought you might want to see what Jason looked like. To remind you that there was more to Robin than... what happened."

"There's nothing to Robin anymore. Robin's dead."

Her voice was bitter, so bitter even she was a little startled by it.

Tim merely nodded. "You can call me any time you want to, Carrie," he said, and he sounded kind.

Now, she looks out the window at the old lady and wonders what to do about the scars.

Robin's dead. She's alive.

She's not sure which of these facts scares her more.

v. Kingdom Come

Working at the restaurant is giving her enough extra pocket money to keep her in cheap video games and soda, and that's all she really needs. She feels pretty bad for some of the older kids who're trying to work their way through college on what's hardly more than tips, but figures there's gotta be other jobs out there somewhere for the people who really need them.

Carrie's been Robin for four months now. Before that, for the first couple of months she worked out the front (after six weeks of dish-dog work in the kitchen), she was some hero pretty much nobody's ever heard of. The Spoiler, all in purple with a big cloak and a mask that covered, like, half her face. Then the guy who was playing Robin had to go look after his Dad or something, so she got promoted.

Carrie likes being Robin. She gets more tips this way, because lots of the customers like to get an eyeful of her legs. The management wants her to dye her hair, but they can forget that. It's just a job. It's not like she owes them any loyalty or anything.

The guy playing Green Lantern asked her out yesterday. He's nineteen, and mostly Carrie doesn't go for older guys but he seems cool. He wants to go see a movie at the megaplex.

Carrie's planning to pay for the popcorn, seeing as how she's got more money to throw around than he does. He can owe her a favour.

Gold

The room's freezing. Jason's hand, pulled back down into sleep halfway through readjusting the blankets over them, rests on Tim's shoulder. Tim's tempted to let the warm weight of it keep him halfway dreaming, but Steph's hair is tickling his mouth and nose and Dick's breathing damp huffs of flu-germ all over the back of his neck, so Tim sighs and opens his eyes.

Kon's hovering a foot off the floorboards by the open door. He raises an eyebrow.

Tim scowls at the thin light coming through the open windows. Regards Kon for a long moment. Covers a yawn with his palm.

"Aw, Gold, man, don't -" Kon pleads.

"Breach!" Tim says sharply. Jason rolls off the lefthand edge of the mattress and lands in a crouch, darting past Kon and out the door. Steph and Dick, either side of Tim, spring up and run for the windows, dropping out of sight and down the two stories to street-level.

Kon groans. "You *suck*."

Tim covers another yawn with his hand. "You shouldn't have let us get so much rest. They'll stay ahead of your team for hours."

It's not an exercise without practical purpose. The chase will help reacquaint Kara, Cassie and Courtney with the lay of Gotham, and give Steph

and Jason and Dick a final chance to sweep their beats for trouble.

"It's not like I've been watching you snore for hours. I only just got here." Kon crosses his arms and humphs, spinning up into a mid-air loop in frustration. "How come you're not playing the Run, Robin, Run game?"

"I have to keep you distracted, don't I?" Tim hauls himself off the bed and limps over to the bottled water supplies. They all have a thin skin of ice over them. Tim sighs and hits one against the wall, dislodging a fine shower of plaster in the process.

Kon glares. "How long's your leg been torn up?"

"Just a few days. The stitches I put in are holding well." Tim gulps a few mouthfuls of water down. "Stop giving me that look."

"You're skin and bones! Don't think I missed those new scars on Robin Red's arm, either. You're all stringy mincemeat under your uniforms."

"We're *fine*."

"You're eight days over curfew. Six weeks in No Man's Land, twelve out. That's the rule for all the teams, Gold, and it's a rule for a reason."

Tim gives Kon a long look. "You're genuinely freaked out right now, aren't you?"

"Hell yes! The four of you are certifiable!"

Cassie flies up to the window Dick dropped through and deposits an irritated-looking Steph on the floor.

"Hi," she mutters to Tim.

"Near Central," he says. It's not a question. Steph makes a face and Cassie nods.

Tim feels his mouth curve into the expressive equivalent of saying 'I told you so'. "Thought you were going to alter your route there?"

"Yeah, well, I didn't get around to it," she grumbles before turning to Cassie and Kon. "So can we go now, or are you going to make us sit around while the others play cat and mouse with Green and Red?"

Kon shrugs. "We can take you now. I heard you guys go into a coma if you're more than five miles apart from each other, though."

"Ha. Ha." Steph's voice is utterly flat.

"C'mon." Cassie holds a hand down. "Let's go."

Kon carries Tim with an arm across his chest. Tim knows it's a test, to see if pressure on his two recently-healed ribs is enough to make him ask for a shift in position. Tim clenches his jaw, knowing any complaint will earn him another lecture on looking after himself. He forces himself not to look down as they fly up and up above the broken skyline.

We're coming back, he promises the city. *We'll always come back*.

"Hey!" Tim hears Cassie shout to Steph against the wind. "I've been meaning to ask. How come you're Brown? The other Robins are jewel colors - Red, Green, and Gold. What made you break the pattern?"

"You might say it's who I was born to be," Steph says, flashing a secretive smile at Tim across the empty sky as she answers. "Have you ever seen a female robin in the wild?"

Cassie seems satisfied with that answer, and treats Steph to a graceful crest and dip through the

air before speeding them ahead of the guys and out of sight.

"What about you?" Kon asks Tim.

The sunshine at the park when he was four and the other kids let him play catch with them. The bracelets and rings Dad would buy for Mom when they both wanted to stop fighting. The bulb on his night-light when he stayed awake late reading in bed.

"It felt right," Tim answers.

This is the end of their third turn in Gotham since the city was cut off, and already there's a routine to their debriefing.

When they reach Star City, Kon takes Tim to Dr Madison. She seems quite impressed with the job Tim did with the stitches up the side of his thigh. She also looks like she's determined not to let him see that she's impressed.

"You're to stay off this for two weeks. Borrow one of Bruce's canes. If you come back to get these stitches out and I even suspect you've been walking or running, you're going to see my bad side. Got it?"

Tim nods, fully aware he'd get a tactile telekinesis smack upside the head if he did otherwise.

Kon drops him off at the spacious house Tim's never going to think of as home no matter how long he stays there.

He can hear the sound of the shower in Steph's en suite. After a moment's deliberation, Tim opts to use the facilities down in the modified basement and

cellars. They don't feel like home either, but they're closer to it than the rest of the house.

The shower spray drives the grime off his skin and pinks the flesh revealed underneath, pounding down against Tim's scalp and hair hard enough to lull him into an exhausted, finally-warm trance.

After a little while Dick and Jason join him, comparing their methods of avoiding Courtney and Kara. The flush of the hot water blurs the edges of the worst of their bruises, softening the look of stark violence on their bodies. They scuffle for the shampoo bottle, laughing giddily with the simple thrill of feeling comfortable and safe.

"Tim? You in there, kiddo?" Dick asks, waving a hand in front of Tim's face. His voice still sounds a little stuffed up from the uncomfortable and persistent cold that's been dogging him.

Tim smiles. "Sorry. I was blanking?"

Jason snorts. "For like two minutes."

"Sorry," Tim says again. "Are you guys going up now?"

"Yeah. There's a bunch of that weird candy you like in the kitchen, did you see?"

Tim does his best impression of looking superior. As he's naked, wet, and the wrong side of underweight, his best isn't that great. "Pocky isn't weird."

"Course not. It's just pretzel sticks dipped in icing, what's weird about that?" Jason says sarcastically, grabbing Tim's hand. "Let's go. I want to watch the news and read the papers and eat an apple. Ten apples."

Tim exchanges a smirking glance with Dick, both of them recalling the numerous times when

Jason would extol the virtues of cheese in a can as an alternative to snacking on fruit.

"I saw that!" Jason says, not turning around. "Like you're not both craving fresh food."

"Saw what? We did nothing." Dick's voice is nothing if not sincere.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Tim's favourite baggy sweater is considerably baggier than it used to be, but he's still using the original notches on the belt for his jeans and that's a step up from last time they got back. He walks back downstairs to the spacious kitchen and dining area, trying to remember his Dad's phone number.

Tim tries to make it a habit to call and check in once a week, whenever he's somewhere with a working phone. He knows his father doesn't especially like that Tim's a Robin, but they've agreed to disagree for the time being. After all, there are worse things than having your child attend the best schools with all expenses paid and be recognized as a member of the country's elite forces.

Tim's Dad probably knows that his son's not really a metahuman, like the paperwork all says, but Tim's known for as long as he can remember that almost all people will opt for easy lies over complicated truths.

Alfred looks shocked at Tim's appearance, despite Tim's protests that he's always been slight and will look fine once he's had a haircut and bought some new clothes.

"And limping, too. Between this and Master Dick's influenza and Master Jason's mild

dehydration and Miss Stephanie's suspected conjunctivitis, I'm seriously considering suggesting you all be put on leashes until your thirtieth birthdays."

"Good luck with that," Tim replies, pouring himself a glass of milk. Something almost like a smile tugs at the corners of Alfred's mouth.

"Master Bruce and I have made it our habit to clip any articles we thought might be of interest to you upon your return. The scrap-book is in the library, at your usual reading table. The others are in there also, I believe."

Tim nods, and heads towards that wing of the house. Alfred makes a small stuttering noise.

"You'll drink that milk in here, I think. The tendency the four of you have towards rambunctiousness, while endearing, is not kind to the carpets."

Tim smiles. "We missed you, Alfie."

"I can assure you the feeling was mutual, sir."

Tim is unsurprised that the first thing he sees when he enters the library is Dick's one-palm handstand on the back of one of the leather couches. Steph's sitting on the windowsill, her hair fluffy and clean around her face and a can of soda balanced precariously on one knee.

"You sneak that past Alfred?" Tim asks, hobbling over to that side of the room. Steph shakes her head.

"I promised him that if I spilled it he was allowed to confiscate my escrima sticks for a week."

Tim gives a low whistle. "Better not spill it, then."

"I wasn't planning on it."

Jason tries to pounce on Tim from behind. Tim sidesteps the surprise attack, sending Jason tumbling.

"How'd you *do* that?" Jason asks, sitting up and rubbing his head.

"Heard you."

"Did not. This carpet could muffle a nuclear strike."

"Hmm. Must've been the smell, then," Tim muses.

"I'm glad to see your spirits are all in good health, at least," Bruce says, surveying the tableau from the doorway. Dick flips down to land on the sofa. Steph puts her drink down on the end table and slides off the windowsill to stand against the wall. Tim offers Jason a hand and pulls him to his feet.

"Hey, Bruce," they all say in unison, then laugh as they realize what they've done.

"Robin," Bruce replies with a nod, moving to sit on the couch on Dick's left. His cane gleams a little, elegant and simple and such a natural part of his movement that sometimes it's difficult to remember that Bruce wasn't walking with it from his very first baby steps. He was already ten years old, and a budding athlete in his school's sports program, when he was injured in the mugging that claimed his parents' lives.

"Julie Madison tells me you're all rather battered," Bruce goes on as Jason flops down beside him. Steph sits cross-legged beside Bruce's legs, in front of Jason. Tim's position is a mirror of Steph's, just as Jason's is of Dick. They always sit like this; it's comfortable and close and all five of them can

move into a defensive stance in less than a second if the need arises.

Dick shrugs, obviously not wanting to contradict the doctor's assessment but loathe to agree. "We did a lot of good work. Between us and the police, Two-Face's gang are all but driven out of the inner city, and nobody's seen anything of the Joker's crew for weeks. Ivy's still got a grip on the park, but that shouldn't be a problem for the new team, so long as nobody lets Kon-El get too close to her."

"Kara should go. I bet she'd look even hotter under Ivy's thrall," Jason suggests. Steph punches him in the shin. "Ow! What'd I do?"

"You were born, for starters."

"Oh, there's an original comeback."

Bruce clears his throat. Steph and Jason go quiet.

"As I was saying, you all need time to recover before you begin active patrols."

They all make small and indignant noises of protest.

"The break will give you a chance to get used to the new commlink equipment I've had designed for you. Your masks now have medium-resolution video linkup as well as the still photograph function built in, and your earpieces can double as plugs if you're in a situation with a harmful noise level."

"Look at Timmy smile at that," Dick says with a grin of his own. "Give him a bunch of new toys and he's the happiest guy in the world."

Bruce keeps talking. "There are also optional uniform variants. A lighter, more flexible weave on the suits -" Dick's face lights up. "- or reinforced gauntlets and shin guards, for protection in close-range fighting -" Jason bares his teeth in a feral grin.

"- or extra loops and sheaths on the tunic and belt, for defensive weapons." Steph beams, balancing her soda can on the tip of one finger.

"You sure know how to make an enforced benching seem like a holiday," Tim remarks, his voice wry. Bruce smiles.

"Believe me, if I thought there was any alternative to keeping the four of you in a confined space for an extended period of time, I'd choose it." Bruce pauses, as if daring them to call him on the lie that is before he goes on. "Lobby groups are making slow but steady headway in having Gotham declared part of the United States again. I was thinking it might be worthwhile to have the four of you hold another press conference, to talk about the living conditions inside the city."

"Only if I don't have to sit next to Jason this time," Steph declares. "He jiggles his leg and chews gum. It's distracting."

"I can't help it if I'm a compulsive multi-tasker."

"Tim and I can sit in the middle of the line and do most of the talking. You two can be the outer edges," Dick says, scolding and placating simultaneously.

"Is that all right with you, Tim?" Bruce asks.

Tim nods. "Fine. I'll put some statistics together based on the notes we brought back."

Bruce nods. "That will be helpful. Is there anything else any of you need?"

"Can't complain," Dick says, stretching as much as his position on the couch will allow.

"I second that," Steph puts in with a nod.

"Well, I wouldn't mind -" Jason starts, grinning. "Nah, I'm kidding. It's all good."

"Yeah," Tim agrees. "No complaints from me."

"Now if only I believed," Bruce says, pretending to sigh. "That this tranquillity could possibly last."

"It could happen."

"Maybe."

"Possibly."

"In theory."

"Well, if you all believe it, then I suppose it must be true."

OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

1. *Martha Wayne*

Pearls and popcorn all over the street, making a sound like pebbles being scattered. She's never thought about what a gunshot would feel like, but it still comes as a surprise somehow. Blunter, larger. So much pain for such a little hole, and she always liked this blouse.

Everything is fast and panicked above her. There's a blur too quick to be seen, red and blue, and Thomas is telling her to hold on and to breathe. His hands are gentle as he staunches the blood.

"Bruce..." she gasps out, hands reaching at the air.

"I'm here," her little boy answers, but the words are not spoken in the tones of a child, and this, more than the bullet, makes Martha hate the man who shot her.

2. *Lara Jor-El*

Tomorrow it will be a year since the first news reports of a flying man began to appear, and eight Earth months since the Park Row mugging which brought her husband out of rumour and into the spotlight.

The boys are on the roof, as they usually are. Clark seems to feel it is his duty to teach Bruce all the stars whenever they're together here, since so few are visible in Gotham. Lara is still unused to the Kansas sky, even after ten years, and stares at it through the kitchen window without feeling any particular emotion.

"You look deep in thought," Jor says, landing by the back door. "Everything all right?"

"I was just thinking about Bruce," Lara confesses. "I fear we're not the help Dr Wayne hopes we might be. Nothing draws him out."

Jor shakes his head. He's never shared Lara's concerns for the boy. "Trust me, he'll grow out of it. If Clark had been any older when we lost Krypton, we'd have had to deal with more rage and frustration than Bruce has. It's a natural reaction to almost losing his mother last year."

"I don't think so. It's not just anger, it's... determination. It makes even Clark uneasy, and you know how fearless he is."

"You're both fretting over nothing. I'm sure Jonathan and Martha aren't concerned."

"They believe the best of everyone."

"And after a decade of their company, it's high time their views began to rub off on us. Now come listen to me talk about the places I've seen today, while I change into something less conspicuous."

"Superman saved the day?"

He grins, and she falls in love with him all over again. "Of course."

3. *Kara Zor-El*

When she awakens, the first thing she sees is a boy her own age, offering her a bundle of clothing.

"You might want to put this on," he says, looking at a fixed point somewhere over her shoulder. Realising her nudity, she blushes.

"Where am I? Who are you? I was.." she pulls the shift over her head. It's emblazoned with her family's crest, but made of a fabric she's never felt before. Some kind of plant fibre. "Did Krypton survive?"

Now he meets her eyes. "I'm sorry. No."

The hurt is too raw and too large for her to cry over yet. "Then who are you, and how do you know my language, and *where am I?*"

"I'm your cousin Cla... Kal-El. I wanted to be the first to meet you, because... well, it doesn't matter yet. Come out and meet everyone else."

Now she notices the room her ship is parked in; the crystalline walls and the echoing space. "Where are we?"

"My father's house. One of them, anyway."

"But... I don't understand. How can you be the same age as me and be Kal-El? If this is your father's house, does that mean..."

"Your ship was caught in a meteor storm. You've arrived sixteen years later than us." He gives her a bright smile. She can see the family likeness; he has the same dimples as she does.

4. *Lex Luthor*

Lex is trying very hard not to hate somebody he has never met. In a few seconds, one of the impossible, perfect doors in Jor-El's vast fortress will slide open, and Clark's cousin will emerge. Kara. Clark's mother says she is a sweet girl, perhaps a little wild.

She has lost her whole world, save for three relatives who have lived without her for sixteen years. It's not fair to hate her, so Lex is trying.

He knows that Jor-El... Jordan Kent... Superman... would be far happier if Lex wasn't among those assembled for Kara's introduction. Clark's father has never trusted him, and Lex can't really fault that as a reaction. In other circumstances, he'd be examining everything he could in the place. Learning it all. Testing for weaknesses.

Jor-El doesn't trust him, but Lara does. Lex knows he's one of her lost sheep, just as she herself is one of Martha Kent's. A legacy of altruism.

And if Clark has ever felt resentful that he's saddled with the angry, directionless boys his mother wants to save, then he hides it well. They make the most unlikely trio of friends ever seen: Clark with his easy manner and genuine goodness; Bruce with his anger and his unstoppable will; Lex's own cynicism and lack of faith in anything which claims to be a hero, even as he stands in the halls of the closest thing his planet has to an earthbound god.

And if Clark has ever suspected that Lex has fallen in love with him, then the suspicion has passed by unremarked upon.

Now there is Kara, the wild card, the cousin Lex is doing his best not to hate unseen. The only creature left in the universe whom Clark might breed with. A girl whose marriage was arranged while she slept inside her ship. Clark has kept his opinions on the whole subject to himself, and Lex imagines that Kara will be no less inscrutable.

The door slides open, and Clark leads a slight girl with tangled blonde hair out to where they stand.

Lex hears Bruce's sharp intake of breath, and sees the flicker in Kara's eyes, and thinks wryly *Oh, this is going to be interesting.*

5. Martha Kent

"Don't they understand that they're dooming themselves to a life without children?"

"There are worse fates," Martha points out, taking another sip of her coffee. Lara's cheeks colour.

"I'm sorry, Martha, I didn't mean --"

"I know you didn't. Please try to calm down. Kara and Bruce are only twenty. They're not thinking about children or doom or anything except each other. Anyway, Lex is still pouring a lot of money into the Wayne Foundation's genetic research programs..."

Lara makes a face. "Sometimes I think Lex would do anything he felt reduced Superman's 'edge' over humanity. He and Bruce are as bad as each other, with their contingency plans. Systematically testing the limits of Clark's endurance. I worry about him, Martha, I do."

"Clark?"

"Lex. I think that he's wading into dangerous waters."

"You're not worried about Bruce?" Martha asks mildly, putting her mug down on the tabletop. Lara shakes her head.

"No... that boy is so starry-eyed with his love for Kara that he'd never even dream of doing anything to hurt what's left of my race."

Martha sighs. How Lara can be so blind to Lex is a mystery.

"Bruce tried to give me a large amount of money, you know," she says, changing the subject. "To thank me for all the summers he spent here growing up."

"That was kind of him." Lara nods in approval.

"I didn't take it."

"Whyever not?!"

"Because if he gives me that much money, our relationship will change," Martha explains, calm, just as she has explained so many other things to Lara over the past decades. "He won't listen to my advice as readily as he does now... which is a precious rare event as it is. Let them have their space. Let them break each other's hearts, or live happily, or whatever else they decide to do. It's their life."

6. Dick Grayson

Everyone always thought that growing up in the circus must've been crazy, but it always felt normal for Dick. And now everyone thinks that his new life is totally normal, because all the crazy parts of it are secret.

They're not his parents, but they never pretend to be and so it's not so bad. They're just there, and look after him, and love him, and Dick loves them back. And he knows about keeping secrets, because he did it all the time back at the circus. Now there's just the three of them -- him, Kara, and Bruce -- in the penthouse, and the rest of the world is made up of rubes who can't be let in on the joke.

Well, not the *whole* rest of the world. There's Martha and Thomas, and Alfred, and everyone out in Kansas (Dick likes visiting them, because it reminds him of the summers out on the road through the middle of nowhere, flipping and spinning and swinging under the stars), and Clark and Lois in Metropolis, and Lex in Metropolis too. Dick feels sorry for Lex, because Lex is the kinda guy who has tons of cool stuff and heaps of money but nobody to spend it on. Not like Bruce, who has Dick and Kara.

Kara is secretly Superwoman, as well as being a teacher, and Bruce is secretly Batman, as well as being an executive, but Dick's not secretly anything yet. Bruce says he can be, if he wants. One day. When he's done growing up and learning and visiting Kansas.

7. Clark Kent

He knows Lois doesn't mind, which makes it worse.

Bruce and Kara have their boys, each as bereft as she was and as dedicated as he. Clark envies Bruce, not so much for the family he's made -- Clark loves Kara, but only as a cousin -- but for being content with it.

Clark has heard his mother wish for a grandchild so often that her desire has become his, too.

Though Lara and Jor-El are still in two minds about him, even after all this time, Clark is nothing but grateful that he has Lex to talk to. Lex always knows what to say, even if it's not always what Clark wants to hear. He's challenged Clark's ideas about birthrights and natural selection and the human spirit at every turn.

"You've made me be a better Superman," Clark told him once, earnestly. Lex had just smiled that same smile he always has for Clark, the one that looks like it wants to be another expression entirely.

"You make me a better man. I'm glad to return the favour," Lex replied.

Now Clark re-reads the lab report Lex has sent him. DNA profiles, gene splicings, amniotic synthetic compounds.

Lex's private line is number one on Clark's speed dial. "Luthor here."

"Lex, it's Clark. I just got your parcel."

"I know. I had it tracked. I expected your call two minutes ago."

"I re-read it a few times."

"So?"

"Lex, this is.. this reads like science fiction."

"Nothing personal, Clark, but so do you."

Clark laughs. "You're right."

"I hope I wasn't overstepping my bounds. I just know how much this means to --"

"You weren't overstepping, Lex. It's... I'm speechless."

"That's reward enough for me,"

8. *Bruce Wayne*

Nobody is surprised when Dick chooses to become Robin. He's had the nickname since before any of them knew him, and there seems no better term to describe the brightness he brings to a room. Jason and Tim touch Kara's heart when they ask her permission to become Nightwing and Flamebird, after mythological heroes from her own culture. Really, Tim is too young to be putting on a costume, but Bruce and Kara long ago learned the impossibility of giving one boy permission and depriving the others. The most powerful beings on earth will keep an eye on Tim.

Stephanie waits until last, and when she answers her voice is soft.

"Batgirl. I'd like to be Batgirl," she says, and the roaring void which has raged in Bruce's heart since that night in Park Row gets a little quieter.

9. *Lois Lane*

Sometimes she dreams that Jor-El was right all along. She didn't grow up with Lex, like Clark did, and she's no better at trusting people unequivocally than Lex himself is, so they've never been totally easy around one another. She feels like he doesn't like her, though she's never given him reason for such a reaction. LexCorp's dealings are above-board and morally sound, and Lois has never found anything suspect in her investigations.

And sometimes she dreams that Jor-El was right, and that the child forming in that incubator in that state-of-the-art laboratory isn't hers at all. She imagines it growing up with eyes a different shade

to hers or Clark's, with that same odd smile Lex wears so often.

Four months. The baby will be... not born, but ready... in four months. Enough time to get the nursery ready, and to plan the novel she'll write while cashing in all her unused vacation time. Enough time to swallow her worries down.

They have a name picked out. Or, rather, a collection of names. The baby will be Kon-El, Kon for short, among his father's family. Otherwise, he'll be Conner Alexander Lane-Kent. Sometimes, Lois says it to him, when she goes to visit the strange, growing thing which is half made up of her.

When Lex is there, he looks from her to the child and back again, and gives her one of his guarded smiles. She has expressions of her own for Lex; ones as unreadable as any alien language.

Neither of them are good at compromises but they get along with one another as best they can, for Clark's sake. One day, in four months, they'll begin to do it for Kon as well.

10. *Martha Wayne*

The Kents and the Els don't like visiting Gotham if they can help it, so Martha particularly appreciates that they've made the effort. Bruce and Kara and their brood are in and out of the Manor so often that it scarcely feels like entertaining to have them to dinner. Lex is an occasional guest, no matter how many times Martha scolds him for not making his visits more frequent.

Clark and Lois and their son are the stars of this year's gathering, of course. Little Kon is bright-eyed

and gummy-mouthed with hair he could have inherited from nobody but his father.

Martha's cough is playing up again, so she takes it easy. When Tim gives her a concerned look, she forces herself to laugh merrily.

"Stop looking so worried, dear. I'm in the same room as the best doctor, and the greatest heroes, in the world. I'm fine."

And if he doesn't quite believe her, well. That's nothing she can help.

Thomas knows, because Martha knew she'd never be able to keep it a secret from him anyway.

It's almost funny. After causing so many ripples through so many lives, that damn bullet's going to kill her in the end after all.

Lara is teaching Kon a Kryptonian clapping game. Dick's new girlfriend is chatting to Lois about the intranet system used at the Planet. Bruce and Lex are planning new partnerships and funding programs.

"All right, everyone!" Clark calls. "Ready? Five... four... three... two... one!"

"Happy new year!" Martha cries out, along with the rest of them.

It's the best of all possible worlds.

BLINK A BRIGHT RED AND GREEN

1.

If anyone had ever asked the man on the street whether they considered Bruce Wayne to be lonely or not, the answer would have been 'over my dead body'. This would be on account of the fact that the

man on the street in question was one Dick Grayson, who was Bruce Wayne's ward and prone to being a touch overdramatic in his reactions from time to time.

Dick had come to live with Bruce when he was eight, and though Dick always knew in later years that those first months in Wayne Manor must have been coloured with grief for his newly-deceased parents, all he could remember of that time was Christmas.

It hadn't been an ostentatious affair; nothing Bruce did with sincerity was ever materially extravagant. Dick hadn't wanted toys, and there were none waiting for him. Only warmth, from the small and gentle fire in the grate, and smiles from Bruce and Alfred, and a trip to the theatre in the afternoon. The play was *Peter Pan*, and Dick found himself thinking of the Lost Boys long after the curtain fell.

"Christmas should be for children," Dick had heard Bruce say to Alfred, and it had sounded like Bruce was repeating something he'd heard a long time ago.

2.

Elizabeth Duquesne hated Christmas. Throughout the rest of the year, she lived a comfortably conformative life at a very exclusive boarding school. But, through some misguided belief in family togetherness, her Aunt Kathy insisted on Elizabeth's presence at Christmas every year.

Neither of them had any other relations, but Elizabeth didn't see why that meant they should punish each other with enforced company so often.

On Elizabeth's fifteenth Christmas, the day was spent with Aunt Kathy's current lover -- a reserved, quiet man who reminded Elizabeth of some of her teachers. The sort, she thought, who would brook no mischief in class, and offer tea and biscuits in his rooms if a bad day was being had.

Bruce Wayne had a ward, a boy of Elizabeth's own age named Dick. Dick didn't like Aunt Kathy any more than Elizabeth did, and both thought Bruce Wayne much too good for her, and so Elizabeth let Dick call her Bette, as only her most intimate friends were permitted to do.

After Christmas dinner, Dick and Bette went walking in the gardens, and when they kissed they both had a stickiness of glace fruit on their mouths, and neither of them liked it as much as they thought they were supposed to.

Bette, feeling a curious bravery, confessed that she couldn't wait to grow up and never see her aunt again. Dick looked back towards the house, and said,

"I wish I didn't have to grow up. Ever."

And Elizabeth didn't quite know what to say to that.

3.

But grow up Dick did, as children do, and as Christmas approached again he began to fret. He was nineteen, now, and a little bit in love with a policeman's daughter, and thinking that perhaps he

might like to travel again, as he had when his parents were alive.

The recurring blot on all these potentialities was, of course, Bruce. For Dick knew that he couldn't very well go away and be an adult without hurting Bruce terribly. Christmas was for children, and what a heartbreak it would be for Bruce to realise that his child had turned into something different.

A solution arrived in an unexpected fashion, as Dick stood browsing in front of a lighted shop window a few evenings before the holiday in question. A hand, skinny enough to dispense with timidity, was attempting to remove his watch from his pocket.

The hand was attached to a boy, and the boy's name was Jason. He was the kind of small which Alfred would have charitably called 'scrappy'. He glared at Dick and tried to run away, but Dick could tell already that he had nowhere to go. They went to the theatre that year, as usual, and Dick was happily surprised at how involved Jason was with the proceedings onstage. When Dick had been thirteen, he hadn't much cared about the fate of little Tinker Bell, but Jason clapped and clapped when asked to do so.

"It's important," he answered, scowl settling back onto his features like a cloak, and so Dick didn't push it, and gave Jason an orange and a smile instead.

Dick didn't really want to leave to go off to see the world, but a part of him did, and it made him glad to think Bruce might be taken care of without him.

4.

Jason knew that Dick would have been furious at him for upsetting tradition, but Jason had never cared much for the traditional and quite enjoyed the notion of upsetting it. The Manor was so large and empty; it seemed utterly logical to fill it with laughter and movement and life for the holidays.

Not the usual sort of people who were invited to Wayne parties, either. Jason had no reason to be anything but scornful of the rich and ineffectual, and it took very little time for his opinion on the matter to rub off onto Bruce. Alfred remained an unknown quantity in the equation, merely raising an eyebrow and offering a dry word or two when asked for his input on their plans.

But he trimmed the tree with strings of popped corn, which Jason liked as decoration, rather than the usual tinsel, an act which Jason correctly interpreted as a show of support and affection.

Alfred hid the silverware and they filled the house with revelers, who brought fiddles and spinning-tops and clever games with them. Bruce and Alfred watched as Jason moved among them, talking and playing and stealing kisses, and felt happy to see him so content. Thirteen had been a difficult age, so fourteen had one-upped it, and each successive year up to the present age of sixteen had been the bearer of new drama. But at Christmas, all those troubles fell away, and only pride remained.

Later, when the evening had changed its shade for the onset of night, Jason leaned his shirtsleeved elbows against the railing of an upstairs balcony, and watched Bruce wander the gardens with a dark-haired beauty who said her name was Selina.

"Happy Christmas," he murmured to the night air, watching the mist of his breath fade into the dark, and then went back inside.

5.

If Dick could not remember his sorrow of age eight, twenty-three more than made up for it. His studies had lost their way, and the requisite youthful follies with a foreign beauty had ended with the attendant heartbreaks. Kory had been glorious, and a corner of Dick's heart would always be hers, but if he was being honest with himself it was somewhat of a relief to have it over and done with.

Jason was an empty space in every hall of the Manor. Dick could feel it as he re-learned the rooms, even though he'd barely spent any time at all here with the boy. Not a boy, now. Grown old enough to have disappeared off to seek his fortune, which is what Alfred said on optimistic days, or perhaps to a sticky end, which is what they all thought when optimism got too tiring.

It was promising to be a very bleak Christmas. Then, one day, a knock at the door. A boy standing there, nervous. His cheeks were flushed from running, and he swallowed a few times before speaking.

"I have a family of my own, but they're often off travelling at Christmas, and I've seen -- I mean, I know -- I mean, what I mean to say is, I know Mr Wayne likes to have company for Christmas, and I thought that you'd want it too even if you have each other, and that perhaps I could..."

Dick smiled, and felt his heart grow lighter. Of course the season would provide a solution. It always did.

The boy's name was Tim, and he was clever enough that Dick would have been dismayed by him if they'd been contemporaries. As it was, he enjoyed Tim's company, and above and beyond that enjoyed the calm and satisfaction Tim's presence seemed to offer Bruce.

By no means the most joyous of their Christmases, it was nonetheless rather all right, considering.

6.

At night, sometimes, Cassandra Cain would find herself wishing that she was in love with her employer. It would make everything easier, in an indefinable and illogical way. It would make things sensible. A scullery maid might love a kind, friendly mistress, but it was a different thing entirely for the scullery maid to want to learn a thing like reading from her.

But Cassandra did. She struggled, and sometimes flew into rages which left her red-faced and certain of her impending dismissal. But always Mrs Kord simply picked up the book, smoothed the cover, and said "Let's try again. I don't know about you, but I'd like to learn the fate of Sydney Carton before the new year" or something similar.

It made the rest of each day go by much easier, the promise of those lessons. The buckets were lighter, Cook's moods were sweeter, and the dishes all but scrubbed themselves.

Cassandra knew that Mrs Kord and Mr Kord liked each other very much, and would have happily died to protect the other. Cassandra also knew they'd never been in love, not really, and never would be. That the life of an inventor's wife had seemed a suitable enough fate for a policeman's daughter.

Cassandra knew that Mrs Kord wasn't in love with her, any more than she was with Mr Kord. It would have been understandable if they had been secret sweethearts, being both of them extremely lovely of face and -- for the most part -- agreeable of temper.

On her smarter days, Cassandra thought perhaps that was why they weren't in love. Both of them needed a little more nonsense than their lives provided.

On Christmas eve, Cassandra sat up in her attic room and scowled at the lines of a book by the light of a guttering candle. They were beginning to reveal themselves to her, slowly. Word by hard-won word. The church bells were chiming outside, and she could hear the sounds of footsteps crushing the new snow onto the pavements on the street below.

Under her pillow lay an often-folded sheet of paper. A letter, from a father now gone.

One day, Cassandra was going to hear his voice again. She just needed to learn the language first.

7.

If a single thought or deed can ever be chosen as the indicator of the person in question's character, this was Tim's: when the doctor told him that he would very soon come into his inheritance, the first thing he did was send for Dick in order to apologise.

"I shan't be able to come to Christmas this year," he said, as if that was the most important part of the situation. Dick had hugged the young man, who was the nearest thing Dick had to a little brother, and assured him that things would be all right.

Yes, Tim went on to explain, they would be. He knew a young woman of excellent character who had a young daughter, and the two of them would be more than happy to spend Christmas with Bruce and Dick.

Dick felt it would have been unfair to laugh at Tim just then, for sixteen was terribly young to become an orphan and watching an ailing parent slip from life was a poor sort of holiday for a boy of any age. But of course Tim had made arrangements. That was what made him who he was.

Miss Stephanie Brown was eighteen years old, with a determined jaw and carefully repaired boots which were nevertheless missing several buttons. Her daughter, Agnes, chose Dick to be her particular friend for the day, and Dick was surprised to find that holding a baby wasn't as difficult as he'd supposed.

8.

After two and a half years of lessons and hard work -- and she knew the meaning of hard work better than most -- Cassandra could read as nicely as any lady. She knew verbs and adjectives and nouns, which were really just fancy names for doing and describing and for things.

Yet still the letter beneath her pillow remained untouched. Each day she'd rise, and think of it, and shake her head. Perhaps tomorrow would be better

for its gifts. It was almost Christmas. She could wait that long.

This particular tomorrow, now become a today, had a different present in store for her. In the mid-morning, a knock came at the kitchen door. In the books she'd read, ruining her eyes by the low light after bed-time, knocks at doors could herald all kinds of adventures, but in Cassandra's experience it usually meant the milk delivery or a friend of Cook's.

On the step stood a man, with a scar on one cheek and hope in his eyes.

"Cassandra Cain?" he asked her, and she nodded. "I know this must be unexpected, but I've reason to believe that we're cousins. My mother died a few years back, you see, and I was given her papers. Didn't even know she was alive until she wasn't... but that's beside the point. Your father was David Cain?"

She had thought of him as a letter for so long that it was quite a shock to remember that he was once flesh. Eventually, she remembered to nod a yes to the man on the step, which won her a broad, relieved grin.

"I knew I'd find you," he said, and she didn't know what to do but take his hand in hers.

9.

On the occasion of Dick's twentieth Christmas since meeting Bruce Wayne, and his twenty-eighth overall, the quiet chatter over dinner was quietened still further by the sound of Tim tapping his fork to his wine glass.

"I have an announcement," he said, though all assembled knew the news to come. The formal way seemed fitting. "I have asked Stephanie to marry me, and she's said yes."

Stephanie, doing her best to convince Agnes that no, goose really was quite delicious, and it wasn't time for sweets yet, gave them all a smile and then turned back to her task. Tim looked like he meant to be the first literal case of bursting with pride.

Bruce began the applause, which Alfred and Dick joined him in after the first clap. It had been obvious from the first that the two were made for each other, but it was always nice to be official about such things.

10.

When Cassandra was a young girl, she'd decided to herself that the saddest kind of loss was the kind which wasn't all that sad at all. When something had just, over time, with distraction and complication, become less and less important. Like Mrs Kord, deciding one day that a predictable life with a good friend for a husband was all she'd ever wanted, as if there had never been daydreams of wild affairs in her girlhood.

Time made things different, and when Cassandra was a young girl that had seemed the greatest tragedy of the world.

But when their suitcases were lost on a sinking ship, it didn't seem to matter at all that her father's letter went with them. Better to lose a letter, the contents still unread, than lose a cousin who grew dearer to her each day. The passing of time could bring good, as well as regret, Cassandra had learned.

Still, there they were, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and each other, sitting in a row boat with the other passengers, the ocean dark as paint all around them.

"We can go to Gotham," Jason said in the quiet. "I always meant to one day, anyway."

Cassandra nodded, and looked up at the stars. They were all so bright, so much brighter than they ever were over London. She found herself wondering how the three wise men had ever guessed which one it was they should be following.

11.

Marriages have a way of begetting marriages. Seeing Tim and Stephanie so happy in their little family made Dick feel that perhaps he, closer and closer to thirty with every passing day, should settle down himself.

Bette had proved an elusive quarry to track, but eventually Dick found her living on a farm.

"You never have to spend time with anybody you don't want to, out here," he remarked, remembering her adolescent loathing for social niceties.

Remembering it even better than he did, Bette cheerfully agreed.

Dick liked Karen, too, who seemed to want nothing else in the world but to spend time with horses and with Bette. She was sturdy and friendly and forthright; all the things Bette's Aunt Kathy had never been. For Christmas, they were doing absolutely nothing at all.

Back at home in the Manor, watching the clock tick over into another Christmas day and seeing Bruce's small, happy smile by the light of the fire,

Dick decided that there were all kinds of ways to be content, and to be settled.

12.

It was an ending worthy of any book Cassandra had read. The delays and mix-ups in travel, the slow turn of seasons, the long distances to cross. December had reached its peak by the time they arrived in Gotham. Though it didn't feel all that much like London had, there was a familiarity to the shape of the city which made Cassandra instantly at home.

So long looking forward to this return, Jason now became increasingly nervous at the prospect. He paced the floors of the room they'd rented upon arriving. He stood at the window, fogging the pane with his breath as he worried over the reunion to come.

"I've always been reckless," he would mutter to himself. "I should have left them a note. I just wanted to start as soon as I could. Go searching." His mouth would tug into a wry smile of admission for a moment. "Adventuring."

"It won't matter," she answered him reassuringly, for what felt like the hundredth time. "Not when they have you back. Not at Christmas."

Cassandra wasn't sure if her words comforted him or not, but either way the time came for them to go.

Jason had another moment of hesitation at the last moment when it was possible, so it was Cassandra who reached up and struck the door knocker against its rest. There was a wreath pinned

to the old wood, and the bright leaves and berries of the holly seemed to be gleaming a hello at them.

She could hear Jason holding his breath beside her, and did her best not to tremble. Knocks on doors heralded all kinds of things in stories.

It swung open creakily, letting out a burst of sound from somewhere deeper in the house. Laughter, and the sound of a child protesting something loudly, and a voice calling "oh, do sit down, Bruce, you've prodded that fire near to death already".

The butler -- Alfred, Jason has told Cassandra that the butler's name was Alfred -- got over his shock so fast that Cassandra felt her deserved a cheer for it.

"I'll set two more place for dinner, then," he said, and ushered them inside.

THE STORIES WE TELL

It's dark outside.

In fact, there might not be an outside at all, just pitch black stretching off into infinity in all directions. But inside (if there can be an inside when the fact of an outside is matter for debate) is warm and snug and quiet, and smells like wood smoke and the faint traces of food eaten earlier. The fire is bright.

There aren't any other patrons at the little round tables dotted across the floor. Just the three of them in the corner, where the wood of the walls is scratched from moments long ago. It's like a diary,

in a way, and Steph tilts her head and wonders at what stories those marks tell.

There's a woman behind the bar, with curly light brown hair and a kind smile. She's humming to herself as she wipes the bench clean, and the firelight catches her skin and makes it glow. One of the boys sitting at the table with Steph, the one with brown hair and the hint of a dimple at one corner of his mouth, is looking at her thoughtfully.

"I don't think she's real," the other one - black hair and hard blue eyes - comments. "She's a character from a story."

Steph smiles. She's a character from a story too, now. She's proud of that. She's part of a legend.

So she'd rather be alive, so what? She didn't get a choice in the matter. It's better to be a character than nothing at all.

The first boy nods. "Yeah, you're right. I betcha I know what story, too. It's one everyone's heard a thousand times where I'm from. The childhood sweetheart. What We're Fighting For. All that sorta thing."

Steph smirks. "Shouldn't she be at home knitting socks and pining?"

He grins and shakes his head. The other boy is rocking his chair back onto the rear legs, resting his shoulders against the wall behind him.

"She's doing her bit to help out on the home front. Like Rosie the Riveter. There's more than one way to tell the childhood sweetheart story." He raises his voice to call to the woman at the bar. "Hey, Rosie, can we get some drinks?"

She pulls three old-fashioned glass bottles of cola out from underneath the countertop and brings them over.

"You can just keep your voice down, James Buchanan," she says with a brusque smile. "It's not often I consent to having my place so empty, especially not on Christmas eve, so I'll be obliged if you'll let me take what peace I can from the rare quiet."

"Is it Christmas?" the boy with the black hair asks. Steph thinks about how she used to feel when she was a kid and it was the holidays and thinks *yeah, this is Christmas*. This place feels like daydreams she used to have of what the perfect place to spend Christmas would be.

The barmaid gives them another quick smile and goes back to her work on the other side of the wide and empty room.

"Your name's James?" Steph asks. He shakes his head.

"Nah. Nobody calls me that. I'm Bucky."

"Steph."

The other boy stops tipping his chair. "Jason," he says, sitting normally at the table now. They pick up the bottles of soda and click the necks together as greeting. "Nice to meet you."

The cola's very bubbly and a little thicker than what Steph's used to. Sweeter, too.

"Christmas, eh?" Bucky scratches his chin. "I know a Christmas story."

"I was visiting an infirmary. Some of the guys were pretty beat up, and everyone knew they wouldn't last to get home but nobody ever said it. It was just around this time of year and all the patients

were missing their families, so they were telling stories to pass the time and distract each other. I guess it might seem weird, a bunch of soldiers who were all good as dead sitting around talking, but it was just one of those things. Like death would leave 'em alone so long as they kept going.

"It went on for a while. Some of the stories were dumb, and some were corny, and some were filthy. People were laughing and crying, and not always when you'd expect them to do one or the other.

"After a while, the stories start being all about the other war, the old war. The one people called the Great War, though what's so great about any war I don't know. Stories about how the firing stopped and there were carols in the air over No Man's Land.

"And this one guy tells a story about his aunt. Her name was Bethany, and she was a nurse up in Canada, and she went over to the field hospitals for a while but when her fiance was killed they sent her home. It hit her pretty hard to lose him like that.

"Bethany keeps working, because that's all she has left, but her heart's broken. Then a guy she went to school with turns up back home. His name's Walt, and he joined up same time as her fiance, so she goes to see him. He's lost an arm and an eye, but he never says a word of complaint about that. He just smiles, and hugs her with the arm he's got left, and says he's glad to see her. He's been thinking about her a lot.

"Bethany's fiance wrote her a letter a couple of days before he died, and turns out that Walt has it to give to her. She reads it, and it's beautiful. It's all about when they first met. At a dance down near the harbor, where the light on the water looked like it

was dancing too. The air was cold and he gave her the coat he was wearing because her shoulders were shivering. The last lines of the letter are about how he loved her in that moment and has ever since and always will.

"Her and Walt start spending time together. Talking about the weather, shy stuff like that, and after a year - on Christmas day, which is why I said this was a Christmas story - he proposed to her, and she said yes."

"And then they lived happily ever after, right?" Jason asks. The words are sarcastic, but Steph thinks the question probably isn't. There's a note of pleading in it that makes her think that he maybe really wants Bucky to say 'yeah'.

"Does anyone?" Bucky asks. That should sound depressing, Steph thinks. It doesn't.

She takes another sip of her drink. "My mom was a nurse."

"Mine was a doctor," Jason puts in, and sighs a little, spinning his bottle back and forth between his palms. "I got a story. I gotta warn you, it's kinda weird. It's about a couple of costumed heroes. A guy and a sidekick. Stupid, right?"

"Nah," Bucky says before Steph can answer. She just shakes her head.

"Well, okay then," Jason says. "The sidekick, he's a bit of an idiot. He never got much of an education. When he was a kid, he'd get Christmas and Halloween mixed up in his head. Like, if you don't leave milk and cookies out for Santa then he'll egg your house and leave you coal, you know? His Dad thinks that's funny, so he never tells the kid that he's mixed everything up. On Christmas morning every

year, he shakes the kid awake and tells him 'Santa came, and thanks you for the milk and cookies, but he wasn't hungry so he says you can eat them for him'. Which makes the kid happy. It's not that they're ever really hungry, it's just that there's not all that many times when he gets a big glass of milk and a plate of cookies all to himself.

"Even when the kid's way too old to think Santa's real, he still leaves the milk and cookies out. It's mostly an excuse for him to have a great breakfast waiting for him in the morning, but it's not only that. It feels like it'd be dumb to stop it.

"Then things go kinda bad, and the Dad dies, and the kid has a Christmas where there aren't any cookies or milk. There's not even a lump of coal or eggs in the morning as a punishment from a pissed-off Santa, and the kid wouldn't have minded getting some of that stuff, even.

"Next year after that, he's been a sidekick for a little while and he never has to worry about having enough to eat, so he takes a flask of milk and a box of cookies back to where he used to live and finds a kid who doesn't have anything to eat and gives it to him.

"The guy that the kid sidekicks for asks him why he did that, and the kid says that it's one of those symbolic things that costumed heroes are supposed to be all about. Then he explains about Christmas and Halloween and how he got mixed up when he was a kid.

"The main hero guy smiles, like he thinks it's funny just like the kid's Dad used to, and then starts talking about this collection his own father had of calacas. They're little figurines for the Day of the

Dead, which is at the same time of year as Halloween but not scary. It's about celebrating life by remembering the dead. Calacas are like little dolls doing ordinary stuff, only they've got skulls for heads and-

"Stop." Steph puts her bottle down on the table. "I'm sorry, I liked your story, it's just... no skulls for heads, okay?"

"I'm seconding that," Bucky puts in. He's looking pale.

Jason gives a single sharp nod. "Right." His smile is as hard and pretty as his eyes, but less guarded.

"Keep going, though," Steph encourages.

"Isn't much else to tell. Next couple of years, the sidekick makes sure that the kids in his old neighborhood always have something on Christmas morning. And then, when he can't anymore... the hero does instead. Still does, far as I know."

"That's swell." Bucky's grin makes his dimple even more obvious. "I wish my story had happy kids in it, 'stead of a bunch of grizzled guys griping about being in hospital."

"I've got a story. It's got a kid in it, but I don't know if I'd call it happy," says Steph. "It hasn't happened yet."

"There's a woman. She's lost a lot. She had a family, once. A husband and a little girl. But they both died. The girl wasn't little anymore when she died, but she wasn't really grown-up yet either. That was all a long time ago, and now the woman's been alone so long she almost doesn't remember any other way of being. She lives in a tiny apartment that's always cold and creaky. It's December 24th and she calls out for pizza, and then swears and

wishes she hadn't when she realizes that she'll have to tip real well because of the date.

"About twenty minutes later the doorbell rings and she expects that it's the pizza.

"It's a girl, and as soon as the woman sees her she knows who she is. Her hair's brown and a little curly, and her eyes are green instead of blue, but the girl still looks like the woman's daughter who died. The daughter had a baby once, and gave it up. She would've made a terrible mother, y'see. It was the hardest thing she ever did. It was harder than dying. Dying's easy.

"The girl's wearing glasses, and the woman thinks that's probably what gets to her the most and makes her eyes tear up. The daughter was supposed to wear glasses, but she never did because she felt stupid in them. It made her squint a bit, and people always used to think she was glaring and a total bitch.

"The girl says 'hi, I'm Anna. I guess you know who I am'. The woman notices that her clothes are worn and torn and there's a backpack slung over one shoulder. Anna's voice is kinda rough, like she's trying not to cry too. The woman nods and beckons her inside.

"Anna's had it pretty hard. Things were okay when she was really young, and she lived with her adoptive family, but then they split up. All the usual garbage with a shitty stepfather and a lousy school and stuff happened, and she ran away, and it all got worse after that. But she tracked down the woman's name by bribing some government records guys. That's one thing Anna's never had to worry about; somehow it's never been hard for her to get money

when she needs it. There's always well-paid, easy work wherever she's been looking, or sometimes people giving her bills just because she looked like she needed it.

"The pizza arrives, and the woman asks if Anna wants some, and Anna says she's vegan. That makes the woman laugh, and she says 'your mother couldn't have been. She loved her burgers, that one'. Which makes them both a bit sad for a minute, because it's like they've conjured her memory up. Anna never even knew her feels like she misses her.

"Anna orders some weird noodle thing with chopped up peas and beans and corn in it from a take-out place down the street, and tries to teach the woman how to eat with chopsticks. The woman tells stories about her daughter who died, Anna's mom, and they're all happy stories. The daughter was a bit of a screw-up, sometimes, but these are things she did that went properly. She saved a kid and a mother in a blizzard, once. Helped stop bad guys from getting away a bunch of times.

"Anna and her grandmother don't really remember how to have a proper Christmas. They stay up all night talking and listen to the church bells at midnight. They watch 'It's a wonderful life' on tv, and walk to the park and feed some pigeons. Sometimes they talk, and sometimes they're quiet.

"In the evening, Anna looks nervous. Her grandmother makes them hot chocolate, and they sit around, and Anna fiddles with the bracelets she wears up her arm.

"Guess I should be going,' she says.

"Going?' the woman asks, confused, and Anna looks up with something almost like hope in her

eyes. And after that, neither of them are alone anymore."

The two boys are quiet for a long time.

"Why'd you say you didn't know if it was happy?" Jason asks. "Sounds happy to me."

"Yeah," Bucky echoes.

Steph shrugs. "A happy ending doesn't make a happy story. Same as how a sad ending doesn't make the rest of what happened sad."

"Wise words," the barmaid says, and all three of them at the table jump a little in surprise. They were too caught up in their conversation to hear that she'd come near. "More drinks?"

"How do we pay?" Jason asks. "I don't know about these two, but I've been kinda strapped for cash lately."

"Arrangements have been made," she answers in a voice which makes it clear she knows just how arch and annoying she's being. Steph wonders how old she is; it's hard to tell in the firelight. "But if you'd feel better after giving, you can pay me by listening to a story of my own. There's nothing so welcome as an audience."

"I'd love to hear your yarn," Bucky answers, pulling the fourth chair at the table out for the barmaid. "Long time since I talked to anyone who wasn't a soldier."

"Those folk left at home are soldiers too, in their way," she replies. "But that's not the scene I'm spinning tonight. This is a story about winter nights and holidays."

"There was once a girl who knew a boy who lived on the top of a hill. One winter she was told by her mother to take bread and jam and milk up the

hill to the house there, because it was only the boy and his uncle who lived in it and everybody knows that menfolk can't muddle along without at least a little help and prodding.

"The uncle had gone to visit friends, and there was just the boy there. He was tracing shapes in the mist on the windowpanes with his long fingers and watching the snow outside. He told the girl a story about his mother and father, and how they would take him out for walks at night when the moonlight made the bare black trees look like spills of ink against the sky.

"She gave him the bread and jam and milk and a bit of her heart as well, that day, though I doubt he ever knew that last gift was even up for giving. Everyone knew, even then when she was barely fourteen - which was younger for those folk than any of you three could possibly imagine, fourteen being as it was for you - that she would marry the gardener's boy with his slow, careful way of thinking and his hands all stained with dark living earth.

"There was a war, of course. This was later, when the girl was a little more grown. She was left to winter and bare branches and snow with no boy on the hill or boy with methodical ideas. She traced patterns on the windows with her own blunt fingertips and wished and hoped that they'd come back to her.

"This being the sort of story that it is, and the war being the sort of war that it was, things did not end as her young heart had wished. The boy on the hill came back, but all those who met him knew it would not be a long stay. He'd loved his home more

than he'd loved his place in it, and by saving one he'd lost the other.

"He was dying slowly. And dying may be easy, as has been said tonight already, but leaving isn't. The heart clings even when it's worn tired and ragged.

"And so the girl and the gardener's boy married, and the trees blossomed and bore fruit and the land was happy. The war was over, for all but the boy on the hill.

"When he was gone, finally gone, it felt unkind to wish for him back. The girl thought herself selfish because his peace was not so important to her as her want for him to still be near. She was angry, and sad, and cried sometimes without knowing quite why. For years, thinking of him hurt her like a knife in the belly. Thinking of his smile, or his laugh, or his voice... they all ached in her.

"And then, one winter's day like any other, one of her little girls - for the girl had girls of her own by this stage, and little boys as well - was sitting by the window and tracing patterns in the mist with her fingers and watching the snow outside. And the girl-who-was-a-mother-now saw the movement and her heart smiled before she even realized. She remembered the boy, and the fondness in the memory was stronger than the hurt. She missed him, but even more than that she loved him."

"So what we're all saying, really, is that life goes on. Right?" Steph asks. The barmaid nods as she stands up.

"You've got to the heart of the matter, I'd say." Retreating back to her bar on the other side of the

room, the faint sounds of her singing drift back to them.

"Except for the ones who're dead," Jason points out in the quiet. "Doesn't go on for them, does it?"

"Stories," says Bucky. "It's about stories, not life. *Stories* go on. People tell them to each other, and the stories live longer than the ones who started them. They're like kids. They're the stuff you leave behind when you run out of luck. I - well, I used to be a mascot. That's not a real thing to be. It's a symbol. A story."

"A legend," Steph says. Jason just shrugs, like he thinks they're both full of it. "Hey, you're the one who brought up the symbols in your story. I know you buy it," she says sharply.

"Whatever," he snaps. "I never said I didn't believe it. Just because I know it's true doesn't mean I have to like it, okay? It sucks being a symbol, it sucks being a cautionary tale and it sucks to be dead. I'd rather be alive than be a legend."

"I'll drink to that," Bucky answers, and raises his near-empty bottle. Steph nods, and does the same.

"To being what we wanted, and what we didn't want," she says. They all swallow in silence.

"Sounds like a setup for a bad joke. 'Three dead kids walk into a bar -'."

Steph and Bucky both chuckle at Jason's remark, and the mood lightens a little.

"We didn't walk here, though, did we?" says Bucky. "We just... arrived."

"I guess the real question is, where do we go next?" Steph puts in. "I wonder if we get a choice."

"To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream," Jason mutters, mouth in a thin line as if he's daring

them to tease him for knowing the quote. "It was one of the only books I had when I was on my own. I read it a bunch of times."

"I never did well at English," Steph admits. Jason grins.

"Yeah, me neither. Just knowing some lines doesn't mean I could, like, say what they were supposed to mean or anything."

"I have a dream sometimes," says Bucky. "Heck, I don't even know if it is a dream. If we dream like regular people or what. I guess that poet guy you were quoting didn't know either."

"In my dream, I'm a photographer. It feels like it's a kind of power to have, same as shooting a gun or flying a plane or carrying information to officers. I'm the one deciding what's in the picture. What gets held inside the frame. It's -" he shrugs, and tips his bottle end-up so that the last droplets of drink slide down the inside curve of the glass to his mouth. "It's good."

Steph taps her fingernail against the side of her own empty bottle. It makes a muted pinging chime, a high little noise rising from the narrow neck. "I had a dream like that, too."

"Not me." Jason shakes his head, and makes a rapid and uneven tattoo on the tabletop with his fingertips. "My dreams are always the same, more or less. Some stuff changes, and some never does. I think I'm supposed to be exactly what I am, and that's all."

She knows it's kinda harsh to snort, but she can't help doing it anyway. "Whatever. It'll happen. Maybe you just haven't noticed yet. That's the point of legends, right? They change for every era and for

every generation. They're old stories that keep getting told, over and over, in new ways. They'd just be ordinary dry ink on dry paper if they didn't keep -" She bites her lip and goes quiet, suddenly aware that her voice was raised and her cheekbones are flushed with high color. "I mean, don't worry about it."

"Thanks," he says, and it doesn't sound like he's being sarcastic.

The clock hanging on the wall behind the bar begins to chime twelve o'clock.

"Christmas day," the barmaid says, and pulls a cloak around her shoulders. "I'd best be off home, to leave presents out for my little ones before they're woken with the dawn. And you lot should be off too. Find a party, have a laugh and a kiss under the mistletoe with a pretty girl or boy. Be young, as you never had a turn at being when you were living.

"That's what Christmas stories are about, and who are we to argue with the stuff of legend?"

She grins, and holds the door open for them while they stand and walk towards it. The cold air snakes in and curls around them, making Steph shiver and wrap her arms around herself.

"It's snowing," Bucky says in surprise. Jason holds a palm out to catch some of the falling flakes.

"Thanks for the -" Steph starts, then stops as she turns around. The barmaid's gone, the inn behind them dark and shut up.

They're on a street, bright with moonlight. There are the sounds of noisy, cheerful carols from somewhere down the street, and the golden spill of light through windows is painting the pavement at the corner.

The three of them look at each other.
"Race you," Steph says, and then they're off.

FLAMEBIRD

His mother has always said "easy come, easy go".

She says it to keep him at his chores, of course; if he works hard for his dataries then he'll appreciate them more. And maybe she's right, because the things he's spent those meagre credits on have always felt precious.

But, now, Jay isn't so sure she's right.

The Knights come through the towns, to test all the babies born since last time they visited. His mother gives him little Lara and tells him to go into the woods where the phoenix berries used to grow, and he does, but the Knights find them anyway. Lara is too little to know when it's prudent to be quiet. Their mother weeps and pleads. "Please, please, not my baby. Please."

But the Knights test Lara's midichlorians, and they're above the range limit. And then they look at Jay, and one of them says "we should check him too, just to be sure".

They prick his finger and their communicator beeps, and one of the Knights smiles and says "ever wanted to be a Jedi, boy?"

His mother sits him down for a long talk when Lara's finally asleep that night, and his mother tells him about how the Knights can't make him go if he doesn't want to, and his mother says he can stay if he likes. But there's no workable land left for miles

and the town is slowly choking and nothing is easy, or will ever be.

"Is Lara going?" he asks. His mother closes her eyes and whispers "Yes."

"But you didn't want us checked."

"I know," she sobs. "I don't know. Oh, my little soldier, what will I do without you?"

Some of his mother's saying turns out true, at least, for nothing about Jay's life on the farm has been easy, and going is the hardest thing he's ever done.

And then, after having enough time to almost get used to the idea that he had a new life coming, Jay stands in front of the Council and listens as they say "too old" and "a shame" and "other work will be found."

He hasn't had to do any work to get here; that meant it had to have been easy. But it doesn't feel easy to let go of the new dream, barely newborn. For a moment, Jay was going to be a Jedi, and then the moment ended.

Easy come, easy go.

They give him work at the Temple, helping in the library and the creche and the training rooms. Anywhere that odd jobs can be found, really. Jay suspects that many feel sorry for him, and their pity itches at his heart. He stays because it means he can see Lara.

As he's not a student, he has no curfew or restriction. Coruscant whistles and zips and sings outside the windows he washes and polishes each

day, glittering and beckoning. Sometimes he goes walking at night. Once he got lost. He wasn't afraid. It isn't like he has anything to lose, after all.

It isn't so bad, really. Jay likes the work he's given, and there is better food to eat here than at home. He misses his mother, but he isn't lonely. The padawans are, for the most part, cordial, and some are friendly. One of them, a little younger than Jay, takes the time to ask him how he is whenever they meet, and stops to talk to him.

Tim had been brought to the temple as a very young child, like most of the younglings, and Jay sometimes feels a little disconcerted by how certain he is of his place in the world.

"You know exactly where you fit," Jay told him once.

"Well, yes," Tim said slowly. "I suppose I do."

Jay tried to keep a smile on his face. "Must be nice."

"I'm sorry, Jay."

Jay wanted to say "I don't need your pity" or "don't look at me like that" or "there's somewhere for me, and I'll know it when it comes", but instead he just shrugged, and made himself grin. "It's okay."

Jay likes to go to the Temple's library and read about worlds he'd never heard about before. The moons of Endor, as lush as his own planet had been centuries earlier. Krypton, with its cool reason and rich mythology. Naboo's beautiful architecture and tangled trade disputes. Reading about how big the universe is makes it, somehow, seem smaller.

Perhaps even more than the library, Jay likes to watch Tim's training, the way Tim can duck and

weave and win a fight even when his eyes are blindfolded.

"Jedi Grayson, Can I learn to do that? I know I'm not going to be a Knight, but I'd love to -"

"You'll have little use for blaster dodging in the AgriCorps, Jay."

Jay can't help but make a face at that. The AgriCorps hold about as much romantic allure for him as mucking out the menageries.

Knight Grayson looks sorry for him for a moment, then says "but I can teach you how to drop down five stories without hurting yourself, if that sounds like fun. Tim has to learn it, too. I can educate the pair of you at once."

Not trusting his voice (it's developed a frustrating habit of wavering across registers, lately), Jay nods.

Still exhilarated from the rush of learning -- and learning a Force trick, at that! -- when evening comes, Jay goes walking out into the City. There are packs of young socialites who follow the night around the planet's surface for days on end; reveling nonstop and leaving glitter and disaster in their wake. Jay likes to watch them dance and laugh and sway, but never accepts the invitations to join their parties. He feels how easy it would be to lose himself to the promise of no consequences and no tomorrows.

On this particular night, he strays into the lower, darker levels. Down nearer to the original, natural surface of the planet, the bright sheen of the new spires above seems impossibly fanciful. This is a world of grime and wheezing, half-crumbled droids.

Jay likes it. It's the sort of place hope goes to give up.

"Hey, kid, you looking for a good time?"

"If I was, would I be here?" Jay asks, and then the light catches the side of the Toydarian's face. The skin is the rainbow-black of oily acid. "Hey, are you okay?"

She doesn't answer, wobbling a little as she flies away.

"A gang mugged her," somebody says behind Jay, and for the first time he feels scared. He whirls, but all he can see is the dark.

"Who's there?"

"You shouldn't be here. It isn't safe."

Jay shrugs. "Everyone dies."

"Reckless attitude."

Now he can make out a figure, deep in the shadows, dressed in blue and black. He swallows. "What's it to you?"

"Go home, boy." The figure moves. Tall, and stern, and glaring at Jay.

"Who are you?"

"Nightwing. I protect this part of the City." With that, he's gone.

Jay tries to feel for a Force signature, but he's never learned how.

"Nightwing," he says quietly to himself, and thinks maybe he understands now what it feels like to know where you belong.

"Tim, if you needed to... I mean, that is, if you wanted to find out..." Jay says the next morning, then huffs a breath of frustration. "If you knew a secret name, but you had to find out what the

ordinary name of the person was, how would you go about it?"

Tim's brow furrows, his lips a thin and thoughtful line. "A secret name? What do you mean?"

Scrubbing the back of his neck with one palm, Jay inspects the floor. He'll have to sweep it again soon; some of the Knights have tracked sand from the rock gardens in on their shoes. "I don't know. A secret name. A name so people can't find out who you really are."

"But you want to find that out?"

"Yeah."

The lines on Tim's forehead get even deeper. "I suppose," he says, voice slow, "I'd collect as much information as I could about the places I knew they had been, and then I'd see who might have been nearby around the same time. I can help you, if you want."

"No! I mean, um, no thanks. Thank you."

"All right." Tim gives him a lingering, wary look. "If you're sure."

It takes hours to find the barest scraps of information, and that's with the state-of-the-art databanks of the Temple library. He sort of wants to give up, and spend the afternoon watching Tim train with the tracking bots, but a strange sense of resolve grips him tighter than the boredom.

This is something... important.

Something nobody's going to take away from him.

He barely notices the hours as he hunts.

Just before morning's first light, Jay slips back to his sleeping quarters, a datachip tucked into a pocket on his belt.

He has a name to follow up on, and a smile as he slips into sleep.

The Jedi keep a small supply of clip-on padawan braids, for those apprentices who've lost theirs through misadventure. Jay thinks there's probably a clause in their Code about not having pride in one's hairstyle, but the small cabinet of neatly plaited strands is there nonetheless.

He steals one as close to his own hair colour as he can find, hiding it in his boot until he's well out of Temple grounds. Then, attaching it behind his right ear, he does his best to look like he's on Very Important Jedi Business as he boards a transport heading in the direction of the Wayne Towers.

He can't mind-trick, but he's becoming adept in the art of talking fast, and it isn't long before he's on the upper levels of the third, and tallest, of the Towers. The cityscape out the window isn't as impressive as the views from the Council rooms at the Temple, but the sights out these windows don't carry with them remembered disappointments, so Jay likes them better.

"Hello, Mr Wayne," he says when the tower's owner joins him.

Bruce Wayne gives him a polite smile. "Hello. Can I help you with something, Padawan?"

Jay bites his lip and looks out the window, trying to keep his resolve up. "You financed the Kryptonian wing at the Museum of Galactic Heritage," he says, and then "I like Kryptonian

stories too," and then "My favourite is about Nightwing and Flamebird. They protected people."

Bruce Wayne's expression doesn't falter or flicker. "Does your Master know you're here?"

The braid comes off with one good tug. "I don't have a Master." The sky outside is a sharp blue, and seems endless. "I don't have anything." With a swallow, he meets Mr Wayne's gaze. "Please let me help."

"I don't think I can help with what you're looking for."

Jay wants to say "no," and "please," and "don't you understand? This is what I'm supposed to do. This is where I fit."

But instead he simply says "You're wrong. You'll see," and leaves.

"Can I take the blindfold off yet?" Tim asks, voice as close to whining as he ever gets.

"Let me think..." Knight Grayson glances over at Jay, and gives a broad wink. "No."

"I saw that," Tim tells them both.

"Good. You shouldn't have any problem seeing your opponents, then."

Tim's mouth twitches in puzzlement. "Opponents? I thought I was fighting only you today, Master."

"I thought Jay might like a try a turn."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

Tim's tone makes Jay want to slap him, or possibly crawl into a dark corner and cry. It's difficult to tell.

"I don't see any harm in it. Might stop you both scowling," Knight Grayson teases.

"I wasn't scowling!" They answer in unison, and the moment's tension evaporates.

A suitable costume, deep gold and vibrant red, costs him most of his savings, but Jay doesn't have anything else to keep them for.

It begins to rain an hour after he starts an informal patrol. The chill drizzle reminds him of the winters of his childhood, when he'd sit at his mother's side and help her shell vegetables for stew.

Sighing, pushing the past back into the past, Jay tries to keep to the dry patches. The latticework of walkways overhead makes a grid of protection.

A Jawa pushes past, muttering to itself as it clutches what looks like a hyperdrive fuse control system to its chest.

"Stop! Hey! You have to pay for that!"

"I'll get her!" Jay calls to the shopkeeper, already running.

He's faster than the Jawa, but the labyrinth of spaces between buildings are more easily navigable by a small, fast-moving scavenger than a would-be hero. Jedi boots are hardy, but before long Jay's feet feel damp and uncomfortable.

"Come back here you little -"

Oh. Jay stumbles as he comes to a stop. Nightwing has the Jawa caught by the collar of her robe.

"I could have caught her."

"Go home, boy."

Jay is torn between sighing and saying "You've already said that, you know", so he does both.

"I'll stop saying it when you listen."

His feet hurt, and his heart stings, but it's still easy enough to turn and run back into the maze of narrow streets.

Two hours and three unconscious criminals later, Jay feels the shadows to his left grow thicker. "Following me?"

Nightwing glares. It seems to be one of his major talents. "How do you expect me to take you seriously when you storm off like a petulant child?"

"I'm not a child. I've seen fourteen of my planet's winters."

"If you behave like a child, I'll assume you're a child."

"You need me. There are supposed to be two. Just like -"

"Sith?" It's almost frightening to hear amusement in Nightwing's voice.

Jay rolls his eyes. "- A *pairbond*. I can watch your back."

"I don't need help." Having said his piece, Nightwing blends back into the shadows.

"And you say I'm the child here!" Jay shouts, stamping his foot, but there's no reply.

"Hah! Got you!"

Tim makes a sound suspiciously like a choked-back yelp, and darts out of the way of Jay's training 'sabre.

"Careful. You're sending off self-satisfaction and jubilation like a wave." Tim circles him on the training mat.

"And jubilation leads to what in your Code, exactly?"

A smirk from Tim, and then a kick Jay doesn't expect.

"Carelessness," Tim says as Jay lands on his back.

"I could have beat you in a dust-wrestle, back home," Jay shoots back, bounding up to his feet again.

"Then I suppose it's my good luck we're not dust-wrestling."

Before Jay can think, frustration and the ache for home and a desire to best Tim coalesces into a wild invisible push, shoving forward and making Tim stumble backwards.

"I didn't... I wasn't..." Jay stammers. "I didn't mean to do that."

"I know." Tim sounds worried. "Your anger stopped you thinking. I... I don't think we should do any more today."

"But Tim -"

"I'm sorry. I..." Tim turns away. "I have to go."

"Fine! See if I care! Go back to your Master and your training! I have to go change the bedding in the nursery anyway."

Tim doesn't look back. "I'm sorry, Jay."

"I don't need your damned pity, Padawan."

As soon as night falls, he takes his leave and heads for the lower levels of the city. He still has duties left unfinished, but nobody stops him.

He can almost hear Tim's voice in his head - "You can't declare that you reject sympathy and then manipulate pity to your own advantage." But he ignores the conscience-voice and drops into a

barely controlled fall, letting stories blur past as the air roars in his ears.

Pockets of slave-traders have begun to spring up, and Jay spends a few satisfying hours chasing down the scattered villains.

Eventually he senses the shadows near him stir and shift, and Nightwing steps out of the dark.

"You've been busy."

"I've been efficient," Jay retorts. "There's a difference. And spare me the speech tonight, okay? You can't tell me what to do."

Nightwing nods once, a sharp movement of his head, and refolds his arms.

Jay feels the skin on his back prickle. "What?"

"I have been... reconsidering."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, for Jay to feel like they had really been spoken. "Oh yeah?"

"Yes. That is, if you are still interested. Flamebird."

Jay can only imagine what his mood would feel like to Tim, though he suspects that 'jubilance' wouldn't cover the half of it.

"Where's Lara... where's Lara... there she is!"

Lara burbles and claps her hands.

"Where's Lara... where's Lara... there she is!"

"You're very good with her," Tim says, watching from the doorway.

"My mother worked in the fields from dusk to dawn. I had to look after Lara almost every night."

"Well, you have a gift for it."

When Jay doesn't answer, Tim sighs and scrubs a hand over his hair. "I want to apologise. I'm sorry for the way I've treated you lately."

"I'm a little exhausted with hearing you say sorry."

"Right. Sor - Um. I'll stop."

Jay laughs. After a second, Tim joins in.

"I have a confession. I've been a little nervous around you lately."

Jay carries Lara back over to her crib. "That's not a confession, Tim. I noticed that. Also, the sky is often blue during the day."

"Master Yoda hits apprentices on the ankle with his walking stick when they use sarcasm."

"So what changed your mind? Why aren't I a worry anymore?"

Tim reaches into the deep sleeve of his robe. "I followed you."

The joy which has carried Jay through the morning stumbles at Tim's words. "What?"

"I... I thought you were turning to the Dark. I would have... understood, I think." Tim draws out a small holodisc. A miniature Jay, flickering and blue, punches down two Hutt mercenaries.

"You didn't get my good side."

"I had to know. I'm -"

"Yes, sorry, we covered that. What would you have done if I had been... what do the Sith call their apprentices?"

Tim shakes his head. "I don't know. I kept telling myself that I'd tell my Master."

"Are you going to tell him about this?"

Tim shuts the holodisc off and puts it back inside his robe. "No. Not as things are now." "Which is your way of saying that you will, if you think things change sufficiently in the future."

Tim nods. "Yes."

There doesn't seem anything to do but shrug. "All right. I know you'll do what's best."

Coruscant whirrs and zips around him, hot winds of exhaust fracturing the night air. In amongst the noise and busyness, there's an incongruous kind of tranquility to be found, and for Jay it's no less real than any Jedi enlightenment could be.

He closes his eyes, and trusts his instincts.

SOLDIERS

One

For the first few days, Dean's barely aware of his surroundings. He knows that's dangerous; Dad would have a thing or two to say about how stupid it is to let moods get in the way of alertness. But Dad's dead, and Dean can't deal just yet.

In later years, he'll always consider this new chapter to have properly begun a couple of nights after the funeral. After a decade of sleeping in fleabag motels, Wayne Manor's impossibly big and old and solid and quiet and empty. Dean can't sleep, no matter how comfortable his bed is. He hasn't had his own room since the night of the fire, a lifetime ago.

He finds Sam sitting in one of the big rooms on the ground floor. Dean doesn't know if it's a family room or a drawing room or maybe even a dining room -- there's a table as big as a car pushed against one wall, near the fireplace, with just a vase and some ornaments on it -- but whatever it is, the moonlight makes it look silver and haunted.

Sam's sitting cross-legged in the centre of the rug, staring up at the big portrait above the mantle. The people in it look kind. The woman has a pearl necklace, and the man's moustache makes Dean think of the old-fashioned, friendly doctor who set his leg after that poltergeist in Arkansas last winter.

"They died," Sam says quietly, turning to glance at Dean. "When Mr Wayne was my age. Alfred told me. I think that's why we're staying here. Because Mr Wayne's reminded of himself."

Dean's not sure what to say, so he just sits down beside Sam. Sam leans against him, letting out a tired little sigh. It's the first

time Dean can remember them touching since Sam dragged him out of the hive just before it blew. They didn't hug at the funeral or anything like that. Neither of them seemed to want to even look at the other much.

"Dick and Mr Wayne are out again. Their beds are empty," Dean tells him. He's still not really used to having another guy the same age as him in the house. At least neither of them are especially tall for fourteen. Sam's already starting to shoot up, and the prospect of his overtaking Dean in height someday offers mild humiliation as a possibility.

"Do you think they know we've guessed?"

Dean shrugs, the movement dampened by the weight of Sam's head against his shoulder. "If they stay out of my way, I'll stay out of theirs."

"You're going to keep doing it? Hunting?"

"Yeah." It's the first time Dean's acknowledged it, even silently in his head, but it feels natural and inevitable to admit.

"You don't mind doing it alone?" And that's the first time either of them have mentioned the proverbial elephant in the room. Without Dad, Sam's got no reason to even pretend that he's a hunter at heart.

"No, Sammy, I don't," Dean answers, and ruffles his brother's hair.

Two

Jason is a year younger than Sam, and Dean never gets a fix on what he really thinks about the guy. The two of them can knock back beers and play poker half the night, talking cars and girls and fighting styles until they go hoarse, but Dean still feels glad that they're not working together. If Bruce feels safe with Jason watching his back, that's fine, but Dean knows it'd be more trouble than it'd be worth. Jason might be a hell of a great warrior, but he's no soldier.

Sam's doing great at school. Dean's doing okay. He's doing better at his other studies, and that keeps Bruce off his back. Ever since Dick introduced Dean to Raven, Dean's theoretical education has been given a major booster. And he's never --

He stops himself before he finishes the thought, but the words rise in his head anyway. *Never failed the practical exams.* Except that he did, that night in the hive. When Dad died. Bee demons only had one good sting in them -- that's why they ended up getting called bees in the demon books -- and Dad had jumped

into it when Dean got knocked down. Sam got Dean out of there; a long-percolating payback for that night when Dean was four years old and Mom died.

Dean sighs, shuts the thoughts back in the mental safe he keeps them in, and goes out hunting.

Three

Dean hates funerals.

Dean hates how slow and empty the world gets after them even more.

He kills a nasty-ass shapeshifter in Bludhaven and gets rotten drunk before catching the train home. It's only two, so he knows Bruce isn't going to be back yet. Since getting back from Africa, Bruce hasn't really been there at all, even when he's sitting with them at dinner.

Something's gotta give, and soon.

Sam's waiting for him in his room, sitting in the big armchair Dean likes to flop into when he's too exhausted to do anything but too wired for bed.

"Hey, man." They've been hanging out more since Jason died. It's hard not to miss the kid, even if he was more trouble than he was worth half the time. "How was school?"

"Okay. My English teacher wants me to apply for more of those college classes. She says I have a chance at a scholarship."

"Y'know Bruce'd pay for whatever college you wanted, Sammy. He could probably build you one of your very own if you wanted it." Dean sits on the edge of his bed, pulling his boots off with a wince.

"Still. It would be nice to pay my own way," Sam says mildly. Then, without changing his tone, he says "He needs a Robin, Dean."

Dean's hand stills, his sock half-unpeeled, and swallows. He doesn't look at Sam.

He knows it's true, but to hear Sam say it like that -- in the 'I have made a decision which you are now being informed of' voice -- is a surprisingly sharp knock.

Dean could've done with a backup a hell of a lot of times over the years, but he's never, *ever* given Sammy crap about his decision to quit after Dad. If he was a different guy, Dean might've made the same choice himself.

"I hope he finds one soon," Sam continues, shifting a little in the seat.

Dean lets out a breath, selfishly relieved to know that his brother's hatred of baddie-fighting doesn't have to make an exception for bright coloured costumes and masks.

"He will. Everything'll be okay," Dean promises. "Now bug off. I'm tired. And you've got school tomorrow."

"Night, Dean. Sleep well."

"Yeah, you too. Scholarship boy."

"I don't have one yet."

"You will," Dean answers, and knows it's true. "Us Winchester's, we always come out on top."

Four

This is the summer which, later, Dean will remember mostly by cars and fair hair. He prefers driving to flying, and he's glad of an excuse to get out of the city for an extended period of time. After so much experience with it, anyone'd expect Dean to be used to Bruce's brooding and Alfred's determined bustling when shit hits the fan by now, but he's not.

He likes where Sam and Jess are living now. Bruce could get them somewhere nicer, of course, but they seem determined to make it on their own as much as they can. Dean's glad to see they're doing okay. Maybe someday he'll get the chance to come crash on their couch for a few weeks. Taste life on the normal side of the mirror.

Dean flirts with Jess out of habit, then takes a deep breath and tells Sam the important news.

"Bruce fired Stephanie."

Sam's mouth tightens, and he closes his eyes in defeat for a moment. "I'll pack my bag."

They hear about the Gotham gang war on the radio when they're two days away from the city, and they get back just in time to help pick up the pieces.

After the funerals, Dean flies back with Sam. Any excuse to avoid the way Dick and Bruce make the house feel like they're haunting it. He knows how to comfort Tim for the loss of his father, and is able to sympathise with all the things Tim isn't admitting to feeling, but Stephanie's death remains a gulf Dean can't imagine how to bridge.

Five hours later, when the fire department has the blaze in Sam's place under control, and Sam's sobs have become choked

gulps, Dean decides he's never hated those mysterious ways God works in more than he does right now.

Five

Training Sam is harder than Dean expected it to be. He's not exactly cut out to be a teacher, even to someone who's as willing a student as Sam is. But Dean's still glad to have him out there. Gotham's getting nastier all the time.

And the dead are getting more familiar.

"He let me die!" Jason shouts against the din of wind and rain. Dean tightens his grip on the rock-salt gun and senses Sam's slight shift in stance beside him.

"Get over it, dude!" Dean shouts back. The narrow asphalt of the alleyway separates them. Jason'll probably make a break for the fire escape any second now, and they'll probably let him go.

They shouldn't. Dad would never let a returned, corporeal spirit with a demonstrated desire to kill go, no matter what reasons for exception there might be.

But Dad's not here, and Dean doesn't think he can bring himself to bring Jason down.

"I'm going to save Gotham. In the way he's never had the guts to," Jason vows now. The words don't sound as grave as he probably means them to. Homicidal vigilantism never sounds all that impressive when it's fighting against a downpour for audibility.

"Good luck with that!" Dean shouts back sarcastically. "You'll have to stop by for milk and cookies sometime and let me know how it goes!"

Jason glances over at Sam, and smirks. "Taken up the family business?"

"Come back with us, Jason," Sam says firmly. "Please. Things will be okay."

The laugh Jason gives sounds desperate. "When has that EVER been true, Sam?"

"How can you hope to save the world if you don't believe it can be?" Dean shoots back. Sam may be the one who's got the law school debating talent, but Dean's as good at pointing out simple truths as anyone.

Jason shakes his head. "I can't go back."

"I'm sorry to hear that, man." Dean raises his gun and fires.

Jason dodges easily, and darts up the fire escape. Sam and Dean watch him vanish into the rain.

"You were telegraphing before you got the gun up. You knew it'd never hit," Sam says when they're alone.

Dean gives a smile that feels crooked on his mouth. "Like he said, Sammy. I'm an optimist."

THE ONE WITH THE BLACKMAIL AND THE PADDLES

Tim rubs his eyes, trying not to smile. It's not funny, not really. He shouldn't laugh.

His dad's pacing downstairs, probably wearing a hole in a priceless antique carpet. Bruce is going to have to pay off a tabloid, and even that might not keep the story quiet. Tim's own social life is going to become very, very surreal for a little while.

But he still wants to laugh.

He stands at his window, looking out at the view, then turns and leans his back against the edge of the frame. "'A world of trouble' is a kind of abstract concept until it happens, isn't it?"

Steph attempts to look sheepish, but she obviously wants to start chuckling too. She bites her lip and nods. "Yeah."

"We're both very, very bad kids, who should be ashamed of the problems we make for everyone."

"Yeah," she says again, but she's started to snicker. "But I still wish I'd seen it."

The giggle-bug catches, and Tim has to force himself to stay composed. "It was pretty funny. In the same way that particularly gory deaths in schlocky horror movies are funny."

He'd been in the food court at Gotham Plaza, watching Darla and Bernard tip sugar packets down

their throats like shots. They aren't the smartest friends he's ever had, but they make him laugh.

"You're replaying it in your head!" Steph accuses, interrupting his thoughts. "Come on, tell it out loud. I want to hear it again."

"Shhh, my dad'll hear. It's not funny."

"I know, I know." She grins.

Tim clears his throat. "I was in the food court, and Bruce came over, looking troubled. He doesn't do that when he's in public as Bruce, not unless there's a really good reason, so I knew it was trouble. I went with him over to the fountain, and he gave me the notes, and said that he was concerned that you were working your way up to outright blackmail. I tried to explain to him that this stuff is the stuff you used to do all the time. That Spoiler started as an name you could sign on police tip-offs, and that the actual punching and swinging came after the fact. But he was still looking scared, so I went to pat him on the arm --"

Tim story is interrupted by a loud cackle from Steph. "Keep quiet, seriously, I don't want another scene tonight."

"Sorry, sweetie. Keep telling."

"I went to pat him on the arm, and that's when Dad and Dana walked past. Dad came over and started shoving Bruce, telling him to stay the hell away from me, and that he wasn't going to ruin my life, and that no jury would convict Dad for beating the crap out of Bruce after what he made me do."

"You have to start putting drugs in the man's water, Tim. Really." Steph looks totally serious, even as she smiles. "That could have gotten nasty."

Tim pushes a hand back through his hair. "It was pretty nasty as it was. Everyone in the foodcourt was staring. I tried to drag Dad away, but he was still shouting and ranting at Bruce. Now everyone's going to think I'm some sort of kept boy for Gotham's favourite son."

Steph's expression can only be described as a leer. "I think I read that book. There were spankings."

"Very funny."

"No, really. Paddles, too. Some people are really kinky."

"Says the girl who, I seem to recall, used to be perfectly happy to make out with a guy whose name she didn't know, whose eyes she'd never seen, and who told her he couldn't make her a part of the rest of his life?"

"You're calling the ex-vigilante kettle kind of black there, Tim." She comes over, resting her arms on his shoulders and giving him a long kiss. When they break apart, her smile's even wider. "You were 'watching' your friends do sugar shots, huh? None of them for smart, sensible Tim Drake?"

He leans in for another kiss, running his palm over her hair. It's still choppy and razor-cut from the style Batman designed for her.

"You're really done with it, huh?" he asks, turning them so they can look out the window as they talk. The glass between them and the evening air seems thin, and lets the chill seep in.

"I know I should feel worse that the notes freaked him out, but I feel like maybe that makes us even. For now," she says, nodding against Tim's shoulder. "I don't think he was right to fire me, and it's not up

to him to tell me what to do as Spoiler, but I figure maybe it's as good a time as any to rest a bit." She presses their hands together, twining her fingers with his. "I... we both had rough stuff happen when we were kids. You saw a kid's parents murdered right in front of you, I had to deal with my dad --"

Tim blinks, a little surprised, then remembers the contents of the notes Bruce showed him. Steph's helpful list of what was easy to hack on the supposedly unhackable computer system. Personal history files had been near the top.

-- and then stuff didn't get any easier when we got older. You lost your mom, I had the baby, we saved the world a few times... I just feel like we never got to be kids, you know? And you keep saying that you never wanted this stuff forever anyway, so this is a good chance for you to break away clean. And I... Batman telling me I couldn't be Robin anymore made me realise that I *do* want this forever. But he didn't start what he does until he was done being a kid. He let himself grow into it. Maybe that's what I need to do, too."

"Mm." Tim rests his cheek against her hair.

"That's all you've got to say?" Steph snorts. "I just poured my heart out, and you say 'mm'?"

"Ok, Mm-*hmm* then," Tim answers easily, squeezing her arm. "Could you do it, though? Could you never see Cass again? And watch the news without feeling terrible?"

"You really miss your friends, huh?"

"I really do."

"I'm sorry, Tim," Steph says, and wraps her arms around him and squeezes. "Really sorry."

"It's not your fault." He sighs. "I guess we'll just see what comes next, huh?"

"We've still got a job to do before we're done." She breaks away from him, her broad, happy smile back in place. Tim feels afraid.

"Please don't tell me this involves any kind of toilet-papering or egg-throwing in the vicinity of Wayne Manor, Steph."

"No, no," she shakes her head, still smiling. "We have to find him a new Robin."

Tim blinks. Then he blinks again. "I hadn't thought of that."

"But I'm right, aren't I? You won't be really happy until you know your place is filled, and now it's my place too. We have to make sure he's looked after. Especially if it means the tabloids have some other kid to heap dirt on while you live in anonymity. Unless you secretly like the idea of being Bruce Wayne's nasty little secret."

"You had me right up until the last part." Tim scratches his eyebrow. "Okay, you're right. So how do we do it? We can't put a want ad in the paper."

"One of the files I broke into said that the kids always came to him. He didn't have to search them out. Which I think is probably more justification than actual truth, but if he wants to think like that I guess it's his call. But that doesn't mean we can't look around for the kind of kids who should be, you know --" her smirk gets a dirty quirk to it. "--coming to Batman."

"Steph, I love you, you know I do, but grow up."

She makes a show of thinking about it. "Nah. Okay, plans." She walks over to Tim's desk and picks up a notepad and pen. "We need to think

about skills. Someone already in our line would be best, but most of them already have their own lives. School-based activities aren't intensive enough. Competitive gymnasts? Science whizkids? Maybe we can go watch some wrestling meets. In fact, let's do that anyway, some of those guys are cute."

"Someone effusive. Full of grace."

Steph looks up from her notebook and gives him a surprisingly soft look. Tim feels a blush rising on his face. "It's going to take me a while to get used to the idea that you read all those files. Cut me a little slack."

"Consider it cut." She turns back to the list. "Okay. Someone athletic, intelligent, dedicated, talkative, graceful, likes swinging through rooftops and paddles."

"Steph."

"Okay, forget the last one. I'll put spankings instead. Can't be too picky."

Tim can feel his brow furrow. "We'll never find someone like this."

"Well, not until we start looking we won't." Steph tears the sheet of paper off the notebook and stuffs it into the pocket of her jeans. "C'mon, let's go take your dad out for ice cream. He deserves a reward for being such an entertainer."

"It's *not* funny."

"Yeah, yeah." She drags him out the door.

MISS WORLD

(part of the 'The Angels You Need' series, which can be found at <http://evenrobins.net>)

First time she draws the costume, Steph's still getting the hang of staying inside the lines. She uses the pencil marked 'granada cherry', because she's deep into her Superman phase and red capes are just the coolest thing in the whole world, ever.

But when she's finished drawing that first version, the red doesn't look as great as she'd expected it would. In fact, it looks sort of like she should be carrying a basket to grandma's house and picking flowers or something. So on the next picture she tries the pencil marked 'eggplant', but really it's just purple and that isn't right either.

One night at dinner she works up her courage and says "Hey, Dad, do criminal masterminds ever have sidekicks?"

"What, like Batman's got that Robin kid?" her Dad spoons out another dollop of potato and gravy from the take-out carton and snorts. "Who needs a tag-along when you can have henchmen? Sidekicks are useless."

"But maybe a sidekick could help. Maybe that's why Batman wins," Steph says, then winces. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

She even has a name all picked out. Cluemaster and Spoiler. But she never gets up the nerve to tell him that, or to show him the drawings. She should wait until she's worked out the colors, at least.

Not much time later her Dad gets put away again, and Steph trades her pencils with a girl at school for a magazine about movie stars. All the other kids are reading those magazines, and her Mom never has any money to give Steph for stuff like that. And pencils are for babies, anyway.

Cartoons are for babies, too, but Saturday mornings are the best time of the week because nobody's ever awake 'cept her and she can sit in front of the TV and watch show after show after show while she munches on cereal. Then she has to put on her nice clothes and catch the bus with her Mom and listen to her Dad complain about how unfair everything is at the jail in the afternoon, but for a little while on Saturday morning she can pretend that everything is perfect.

Today the morning news is running over into cartoon-time, because there's some big deal going on. Steph makes a face and hopes it'll be over soon. Enough depressing stuff happens the rest of the time, why does it have to take away her shows as well?

The television is showing grainy security-camera footage from a warehouse brawl. Some kid in what looks like a costume and a cape and a mask is doing a really cool-looking somersault down onto a couple of tough-looking guys. The picture's really bad, but it looks like the boy's smiling.

"Some say that this tape is evidence of the existence of Robin, the rumoured child vigilante operating in the inner city area," the news reporter says. Steph stares at the screen as the blurred shape twists through the air again.

"Robin," she whispers, and doesn't care that her cereal's going soggy.

As Steph grows up she gets angrier, until she thinks that maybe everything would just be better if her Dad would just die and leave them alone forever. She digs out all the old drawings she'd done

of costumes and burns them, and the smoke gets up her nose and in her eyes and makes her hair smell kind of funky. She wonders if she'd be half so mad at him if she hadn't hoped that one day he'd see what she could be.

She starts seeing a guy at school named Dean, who pays for her ticket at the movies and tells her she's got a great body and always asks if she came when they're done for the night. Steph likes him okay. She thinks she should probably care more about him than she does. His best feature is that he's convenient.

Her Dad gets out of jail again, and starts coming home with books called things like 'Unlocking Self-Made Doors: ten steps to recognising self-destructive habits' and 'Redrawing the playing field: making a new set of rules for the big-business game'. At first, Steph hopes that this means he's gonna get a real job, and that maybe things will be okay, but then she hears him talking to her Mom about how he isn't gonna slip up this time. This time, he'll do it right. No more clues.

The first time she thinks of ratting her Dad out to the police, the part of Steph that's still a little kid playing with drawing pencils recoils in horror and disgust. It's one thing for her to hate him, it's another for her to bring the law down on his head. She can't do that.

Then her Mom takes too many pills by accident again, and Steph has to make her throw up and then has to sit up waiting all night to see if she needs an ambulance or something. Long hours of looking around at the empty bottles and the cracked-up linoleum floor and her dad's stupid self-help books.

Listening to the way her Mom's breathing sounded so scratchy and tired and old, even though her mother's younger than most of the Moms of the kids in Steph's class.

Steph gets good at sneaking around after her Dad, listening in on the conversations he has with his buddies. As usual, his plans are lame and stupid, but she's not going to risk him tripping up by himself. It's a long time since she's seen her Dad so dedicated about anything, and that can't be a good thing.

It's a spur-of-the-moment choice to sign the notes to the cops as 'the Spoiler'. It seems right that something made up as a way for her to help her Dad out is going to be the thing to undo his plans. She wonders if the hot, furious feeling behind her eyes is what books and movies call betrayal. That doesn't seem right. It isn't like her Dad ever promised her anything in the first place.

It's not so much an impulse as an idea she can't believe she didn't have before to address the letters to Batman and Robin, care of the police. She wants them to be the ones to take her Dad out, and she wants to be around to see that happen.

It's actually pretty easy to sneak into the city and creep around the rooftops. If more people realised that, there'd probably be even more vigilantes working in Gotham than there are. It's a piece of cake to get a vantage point up high and out of the way, and following her Dad has taught Steph how to stay quiet enough that people don't hear her.

Things go just like she'd hoped they would, right down to Robin being the one to sock her Dad in the jaw. Steph can't help giving a little yelp of triumph

when that happens, and has to flatten herself against a shadowed wall to avoid being spotted by the long glance Robin gives her rooftop.

She stays there long after they're done, after they've melted back into the dark of the city. She watches the cops arrive and cuff her Dad and read him his rights. It feels kind of like she's been asleep for a long time, and only just woken up.

"You're crazy this week," Dean says a couple of nights later. "Are you high or something?"

Steph glares at him. "No, asshole. You know I don't do shit like that."

"Hey, hey, just asking."

"Well, don't ask again."

"I thought you might have bought some of that female viagra stuff off the internet."

She resists the urge to bury her head in her hands. She also resists the urge to smack Dean upside the head hard enough to make him shut up.

"I'm just having a good week. Quit looking your gift horse in the mouth," Steph mutters, but he's asleep already.

In the end, she picks out a heavy dark green material for the costume. In her Home Economics class at school she sews a pair of close-fitting pants and a clingy top, unpicking and re-doing the arms twice so she can move properly. All the patterns they have to choose from are for ordinary fashionable clothes, and none of them factor in the need to uppercut cleanly. Steph giggles and imagines what the manufacturers would think if she

wrote to them and told them off for their design flaws.

At home, she makes the matching cloak and hood. The sewing machine keeps tripping the circuit breaker, so she only uses it when her Mom isn't watching television or cooking stuff in the microwave. It would be mortifying to get caught out because of undercooked popcorn or a soap opera or something.

The first time Steph looks in the mirror and sees the Spoiler staring back, the rush is intense. The mask she's designed covers her whole face, and makes her look kind of like an alien or a nightmare.

For the first couple of nights she doesn't see Batman and Robin at all, but running around the city in a costume is cool enough that she doesn't mind all that much. Then, late enough one night that Steph's trying not to yawn behind her hand, she catches sight of a red-and-green blur swinging down across the space between two office towers.

It's hard, staying quiet and following him at the same time. It probably takes tons of training to get the 'speed and stealth' thing down properly. Steph does her best, and manages to keep Robin in sight for almost an hour before losing him near the theatre district.

When she was a kid, she'd sometimes imagined throwing down against Robin. That'd been when she'd still thought that purple might be okay for the Spoiler costume, and in those scenarios they'd been out in some alley in the rain with dirt and garbage all around them.

"My old nemesis," Robin'd say.

"We meet again," the Spoiler would answer, and then they'd fight and Steph would be better at everything, all the kicks and punches and somersaults.

The next part of the daydream was always hazy, because she wasn't sure what criminal masterminds did when they won against guys like Batman and Robin. But it always ended up exactly the same way, with her Dad taking her out for chili cheese fries.

"Great job, kid," he'd say.

Now, she's not sure what she wants. She likes watching Robin fight. He always looks more than a little scary, and Steph's glad that they're not enemies like she'd wanted when she was younger. She guesses that they're allies, since she's the one who told them where the heist was gonna be and Robin's the one who knocked her Dad out cold.

Robin doesn't work on his own all that much. Steph's way too scared of Batman to follow them round much when they're together. Robin's probably not a whole lot older than she is, but Batman's been putting her Dad away almost since she was in diapers. She's heard that he doesn't actually kill anybody, but that doesn't mean she thinks he'd be nice to some kid tailing his partner.

Batman's not as big as she'd expected, as he'd always been in her nightmares, but Steph thinks that might be because of how the Spoiler looks when she looks at a mirror. She doesn't need to be scared of nightmares anymore. She's one herself. And they're on the same side now. Kind of.

Watching Robin's nightly solo sweep of the city isn't much, but it's enough. Sometimes there's a moment or two where he'll go really still and turn slowly, as if he can feel that he's being watched. Once he put his hand up to his ear, like he was listening to a radio transmitter or something, and said "reoccurrence confirmed" in a grim, clipped voice.

But he's never thrown gas grenades or ninja stars or anything at her, so Steph figures that she's either better at sneaking than she thought, or Robin knows she's there and doesn't really care.

The city's in the middle of a nasty cold snap and Steph's halfway tempted to stay at home and take the night off from bird-watching. If she stays home, though, Dean'll want to hook up, and Steph's had as much of him as she can take for this week.

The mask of her costume keeps her face a bit warmer than it would be otherwise, at least. The material covering her arms and legs isn't really thick enough for this kind of weather, so she's staying mobile as a way of keeping warm.

Robin's doing his rounds just the same as always, and Steph wonders if Batman ever tells him off for being predictable. It's taken her a long time to learn his routine, but if she could then some really bad guy could just as easily, right?

As Robin's halfway across the roof of one of the newest office buildings on the block, he pulls up sharply and puts his hand to his ear. Steph is two buildings behind, watching with binoculars, and can only see his back, but his posture reminds her of cats just before they jump at something. Alert and

hyperaware. Then he breaks into a run in a completely unexpected direction, and it's all Steph can do to keep up.

They end up in an area Steph's not familiar with, where the buildings are lower-set and grimmer looking. The Batmobile's parked on a corner underneath a busted streetlight, and Robin runs past it without a second glance. Steph does too, but hopes she'll have a chance to look at it properly some other time. She isn't one of those girls who really gets the whole car thing, but it's the Batmobile. She'd have to be insane not to find it at least a little bit cool.

She can hear the sounds of a brawl now, the mix of metallic and organic noises as weapons and flesh connect. Batman's in the centre of a constricting ring of weird-looking guys. Some of them are carrying what look like nunchakus, only instead of chain between the two sections there's a length of crackling blue lightning.

Robin jumps straight into the fray without hesitating, and Steph's mesmerised by the way he can look so controlled in the middle of chaos. He looks like he's not quite a part of what's going on around him, as if it's coincidence that his hand was on the back of that guy's head when it slammed into the knee of another.

Batman, on the other hand, might as well have been born in the middle of a battle, he looks so at home there. Between them, Robin and Batman are doing pretty well, but there are a lot of guys and some of the weapons Steph gets glimpses of are pretty damn weird looking. It's going to be a narrow victory.

They'll win in the end, of course. That's what they do.

Two of the guys knock Robin down for a second and Batman's there a split-second later, punching the pair so hard that Steph can't help but wince in sympathy. He says something to Robin that Steph can't catch over the noise of the fight. Robin starts to shake his head in reply, but then the movement changes into a nod.

Then... holy shit, Robin's looking straight at her. "A little help here, stalker girl?"

She doesn't give herself time to think about it and freak out before she's into the fight. Her punches aren't particularly tidy, but they do the job they're meant for and that's more than enough for her. The weird tazer-toys the gang are carrying look like they'd probably hurt like hell, so Steph makes a point of not finding out for herself.

It's not like she's a lot of help, much as she'd like to be, but having three people to keep track of seems to throw their opponents off enough that Batman and Robin can hold their own. A big thuggish guy, the sort her Dad used to hang around with when he wanted to feel tough, comes at her with a short stick that gives off sparks at one end. He hits against a wall and the sparks explode into a shower of light, and Steph's pretty sure that it's not just pretty to look at.

She lets him strike out before she ducks, relying on his momentum to make him fall hard into her punch. It gives the blow a power she wouldn't have been able to get on her own, and luck plants her knuckles firmly on his nose. Blood spatters over his face and shirt and the shock-stick, and Steph pokes

him in the eye as hard as she can before he's recovered from the first hit. He goes down and doesn't get back up, and Steph thinks she could probably get used to feeling like this.

The grunts and thuds go quieter under the rising sound of sirens.

"The police will handle the rest," Batman says. There are a couple of gang members still standing, but they don't look much like they want to go another round.

Robin nods, and inclines his head towards Steph. "What about her?"

"The backseat is cramped; the car's not really meant for more than two," Batman tells her.

"That's fine," Steph answers. "I don't mind." As if she's going to say 'oh, never mind then, I won't ride in a car that doesn't have leg room'. As if.

"You have a name?" Robin asks her as they round the corner and head for the Batmobile. He sounds even grimmer than usual. Steph wonders if he's angry at her.

"The Spoiler." She feels as if she did get shocked, kinda. Like there's lightning all over her skin. If it always feels this great afterwards, no wonder Batman and Robin fight enemies every night they can.

"You helped us on the Cluemaster case," Batman says.

"Yeah." Steph nods, and feels like a million bucks. There's probably never gonna be anything that sounds as sweet as those words.

Once they're in the car - the back seat is just as cramped as Batman warned - Steph just sits and listens to Batman and Robin talk, and wonders how

much of a dumb kid she'd look if she asked where they're going.

The topic of conversation is the weapons that the gang were using. They're prototypes of some new kind of design that's supposed to have been vetoed by the government back at the blueprint stages.

When Batman and Robin lapse into silence, Steph realises that the city has been behind them for quite a while. She has no idea where they are.

Batman looks in the rearview mirror, somehow managing to make eye contact with Steph despite the fact that neither of them have their eyes visible. "No masks in the Cave."

Steph takes a moment to blink in surprise and no small amount of glee before she stiffens in fear. Now they're gonna know she's just a kid, and they won't want her around. She's no shorter than Robin, but his face is sharp and spare, and he doesn't look young at all. Steph's still got a bit of puppy fat left, for chrissakes. They'll probably call her Mom to come pick her up.

"Okay," she says, and pulls at her hood and the black undercowl. The air inside the car feels thin and dry against her cheeks. Robin's rubbing some kind of ointment into the skin around his mask. Batman pushes his own cowl back.

"Solvent," Robin explains, seeing Steph's quizzical look at the ointment. "Breaks the glue compound down."

It's only after she's nodded, and thought for a second how nobody ever really considers little practical things like that when they daydream about costumed hero-guys, that Steph remembers to

actually glance over and see what Batman looks like unmasked.

Oh.

Oh, wow.

Batman is a teenager. And now that Robin's mask is coming loose and he's prying it off, neither of them look any different from any of the guys she knows. Well, cuter maybe, and kind of stern-looking, but Robin's probably not even as old as her.

"You were expecting maybe the Easter bunny?" Batman asks her, and he's smirking. "Hi. I'm Jason."

His voice sounds totally different. Ordinary. Steph feels a little like she imagines tripping or being drunk does.

"Steph," she manages to say.

"Tim," Robin puts in, and he doesn't sound as cross at her anymore. Most guys don't stay angry at pretty blonde girls for long. It's one of the reasons that the Spoiler is neither pretty nor blonde. "And this is the Cave."

She's here. She's standing in the secret hideout of Batman and Robin, and they haven't phoned her Mom, and...

"Two mugs. Thank Christ. If there'd been three, I would've feared for my life," Batman - Jason - is saying to Tim. Robin's name is Tim. "I'm gonna break it to him on my own terms this time."

"You're sure, then?" Tim asks, not reaching for the mug of hot chocolate waiting for him on a tray with some sandwiches.

"If you weren't thinking that way yourself, you'd've taken her down the first time she followed you," answers Jason, and takes a gulp of his drink.

He's got a couple of scars on his face, deep-looking ones, and their paleness makes the light gold of his tan stand out more obviously on the rest of his skin. Steph never expected Batman look like he spent time in the sun.

"Mm," Tim says by way of answer, giving Steph a long look. "I'm gonna go. I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Take your time. I don't think we'll be going back out."

Before Tim walks off, the two of them knock fists, and it's such a typical boy gesture that Steph feels angry for some weird reason. Like it's not fair that they've all ended up where they are.

The anger pools in her stomach, getting all twisted in and around and through the thrum of energy left over from the fight. Steph wonders how long she'll be here, and if it'll be too late to head over to Dean's when she's done. Her whole body feels tense and tingly.

"You'll need a new uniform," Jason says, breaking her concentration. Steph looks down at her dark green suit.

"What's wrong with this one?"

"No kevlar, the bare basics on your belt, the cloak's longer than it needs to be for deceleration purposes, the boots should have a firmer tread to grip with -" Jason ticks the points off on his fingers.

"I never thought of that stuff. I just wanted it to look cool," Steph admits.

"Well, you got that part right, anyway. Don't worry, we'll keep the same design. Just make it better."

"When you were talking to Robin a second ago, did you mean what I think you meant? You want me to be a part of this?" She looks around. It's impossible to even tell how far the cavern stretches out around them. Maybe it goes on forever.

"Do you want to be?"

Steph doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Then yeah."

Steph's heart beats even faster. "I think I'll need to be someone else, then. The Spoiler isn't... wasn't made up to work in a team." She very carefully does not listen to the tiny, childish voice in her head shouting 'liar!', and equally carefully doesn't think about her Dad.

Jason gives her a long look, and Steph tries not to fidget under the scrutiny.

"Come on," he says, and walks over towards a metal door set into one of the rock walls. "We'll see what there is in your size."

It's a closet, with what looks like dozens of copies of the Batman and Robin suits hanging up. Some of them have obvious differences, with higher collars or differently shaped cowls or things like that. Further down, there are lots of large drawers with neat hand-written labels on them. This is where Jason heads, pulling out one at hip-height marked 'Batgirl'.

"Are you serious?" Steph asks, and she can feel her eyes going wide and round.

"Not nearly so often as Tim'd like," Jason wisecracks, giving her a grin.

"But I thought there was a Batgirl already."

The grin fades. Jason looks down into the drawer, one hand reaching out to touch the folded-up uniform stored there. "Yeah. There was."

Oh, shit. "I'm sorry."

"If you want this, Steph, you need to be sure. Because it's dangerous. People get killed. Even your best might not be enough. The first Batgirl's dead. The first Robin's dead, and the second one got beaten up so badly that it was only luck that kept him from being dead too. Tim's the third one." Jason swallows, eyes still fixed on the costumes in the drawer. "The first Batman's dead."

Of course. There's no way Jason's old enough to have been Batman for as long as there's been a Batman around.

He breathes in deeply and looks up. His eyes are narrowed, his mouth a firm line. "You have to know all that, and still want this enough to take it anyway."

Steph stays quiet for a few seconds. She'd tried to consider this stuff, but now she knows that she didn't think about what it meant. She's never seen anybody who's lost everyone, or nearly everyone, before. There's something bleak and strong in Jason's eyes that almost hurts to look at.

"I want it," she whispers.

"Say it like you mean it."

"I want it." She balls her hands into fists at her sides. Her whole body feels hot and she knows she's gonna go straight to Dean's when she leaves the Cave. The only other option is to just explode.

Impossibly, the smile comes back to Jason's face. "Glad to have you aboard."

Steph's too knocked around by the sudden switch in mood to say anything right away. Jason turns back to the drawer and rummages in it, pulling out a suit and cowl and cape. "These should fit. We can modify the design, if you like. Robin's look's been updated, so don't worry about 'messing around with the legend' or anything like that. The legend's whatever you make it, now."

"I saw something on tv once. Years ago. Security-camera footage of Robin fighting some thugs."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He was doing a really complicated somersault."

"That was Dick, then. The first Robin." This time, Jason's trip down memory lane makes him smile a little. Steph can't remember the last time she saw someone as pretty as him. No, 'pretty' isn't the right word at all, but 'attractive' sounds so colorless and 'handsome' isn't right either. Maybe this is what charisma is. "He was great at that stuff."

"Were you the second one? Is that -" she hesitates. It might be that he gets offended when people mention his scars. "- how you got hurt?"

"Yes." He doesn't offer anything else, but he doesn't seem angry that she asked.

"They look pretty new. Do they still hurt?"

Jason's laugh is a little choked. "Like you wouldn't believe." He pauses for a moment, as if waiting for her to ask something else. When she doesn't, he starts talking again. "I've got a bunch of seriously hardcore painkillers that the doctor gave me, but I figure that if I took one of those whenever

it got bad I'd end up a junkie by the end of a week. Not gonna happen."

She can't help it. She can't stop herself stepping in close and grabbing the back of his neck and kissing him hard. He makes a surprised sort of grunt, then he puts his hands on her shoulders and pushes her back. He's grinning.

"That was totally the first time you've been in the middle of a fight in costume, wasn't it?" he asks. Steph nods. "Man, here I am lecturing you about uniform construction and the dangers of this life and you're so horny you probably didn't hear a word I said."

Steph scowls. "I was paying attention."

"Yeah, sure you were," Jason says disbelievingly, grabbing one of her hands and leading her back into the Cave. "Come on."

They walk back over to the car, of all places, and Jason sits her down on the hood and tugs at the waistband of her costume.

"The car?" Steph asks, smirking and bracing herself on her hands so she can lift her hips as he pulls the leggings and her panties down and off in one movement.

He doesn't bother to answer her. "That's one advantage you've got over more complicated uniforms, anyway," he offers instead, kneeling down.

"Didn't actually think I'd have to factor in - ah!" She gasps when he bites her inner thigh. His thumbs are digging in, pushing her legs wider apart, and Steph notices that he's still got his gauntlets on.

"Take... take your gloves off," she stutters, because now he's just breathing against her and the

little gusts of air are making her want to squirm. She's not going to. She's going to prove she's got self-control.

Jason nods, and pulls one off and then the other without looking away from the little line of dents the elastic of her underwear has left below her navel. He grips at the edge of the hood with one hand and the dampness on his palm leaves ghost fingerprints behind when he moves a little. His other hand he rests on her leg again, moving the thumb back and forth in teasing little strokes.

She's not going to squirm. She's not going to beg. She's - "Hurry the fuck up," Steph growls.

"Temper, temper," Jason says, and gives her a long, slow swipe of his tongue. His mouth's still hot from the drink he had earlier and Steph's been on edge for so long that it takes all the willpower she's ever had not to shout something obscene.

She tangles a hand in his hair, and realises after a second that the uneven lines she can feel on his scalp are scars. She tugs a little and is rewarded with a light scrape of teeth, so she does it again.

"Ah, Jason... Batman..." she says, letting her head fall back as he steps up his rhythm. The Cave feels huge and old and cold around them, even though it's not actually that chilly. She remembers the way that guy with the shock-stick went down from her punch and bucks a little against Jason. She wishes she had the rest of her costume on, so she could bite on the cloth of her mask and hold in her gasps.

It doesn't take long before her breath goes harsh and hoarse. Her thighs skid a little against the hood's finish and that's unfamiliar enough to steady her a bit, but then Jason sucks hard, hungrily, and digs his

fingers into her thigh until Steph can tell it's gonna leave an arc of bruises behind.

"Oh, Christ, I'm gonna -" she says, and then she does, legs shaking and her back arching as if her body can't decide if the feeling's too much or not enough. Her vision goes to white and then fades down to peach before she can get back to herself and it feels like all her bones have been replaced with wrung-out rags. Dean hasn't got anything on this guy.

"Been way too long since I did that," Jason says raggedly, resting his cheek against her thigh. His mouth's swollen and dark. "Feel better?"

"Hell yeah." Steph smiles, and pushes his hair back off his face. It's soft and thick and wavy, and she pets at it a few times. Jason's flush fades slightly and he stands up.

"I gotta go upstairs for a while. There's a shower over that way." He gestures distractedly.

"Hey, no, don't you want me to -"

"I'm fine," Jason says, and grins as if that'll prove his words. "That was great. But I've got stuff that'll just get worse if I put off doing it. I don't know how long I'll be, but there're a bunch of sweats in a cupboard near the showers. Put some on and hit the equipment. Your training'll be full-on, so you might as well start soon as you can. Tim can give you pointers when he gets back."

"Where's he gone, anyway?" Steph thinks that maybe she should feel self-conscious about sitting, half-naked and well-fucked, on top of the Batmobile. She doesn't.

"Check on his Mom, I think. He's been worrying about her. Some stuff happened, and Superman had

to save Tim's folks from this psycho, and now I think things are kind of a mess at home for him."

Nice to see we've all got healthy coping mechanisms, she thinks but doesn't say. "Hey, are you sure you don't want me to return the favor? I give as good as I get."

"No, seriously, I'm good." Jason's smile is a little bit distracted. Melancholy, almost. "I'll be back soon."

Steph collects the discarded bits of her costume and heads for the showers. She's never done real physical training before, nothing beyond some track and field stuff at school.

After she's cleaned up and dressed in some of the workout clothes from the cupboard, Steph goes back into the closet-room Jason showed her earlier. The 'Batgirl' drawer is still open, and the suit feels surprisingly light in Steph's hands.

She'll have to change the design of the cowl, for one thing. So her whole face is covered. And she doesn't want her hair loose out the back, either. The colors should be darker...

Steph grins as she walks towards the equipment. She'll buy a packet of drawing pencils on her way home.

SING FOR THE MOMENT

(part of the 'The Red and the Black' series, which can be found at <http://evenrobins.net>)

At two-thirty, as the motel room's getting that lazy mid-afternoon warmth from the sunlight through the grimy windows, Tim gives up at gets out of bed. He's feeling twitchy; if he does manage to fall asleep again it'll just end up with him waking Jason.

In the bathroom mirror his skin looks chalky. His eyes are bloodshot, the pupils pindot-thin. Tim sighs, and presses down on the pump-pack of sunscreen they bought after last time his skin went this pasty. He'll burn easy, if he goes out anywhere, and it's not like there's anything else to do but go out.

He does his best to be quiet as he crosses to the door and unlatches the lock, but as he's easing the old hinges open Jason stirs on the bed.

"If I have to break you out of jail, I'm going to lock you in the trunk," he warns Tim, voice muzzy. "And bring back some fruit. You'll end up with scurvy."

Being told what to do gets him cranky, so he steals Jason's sunglasses and the ancient walkman they found at a charity store. Tim is nowhere near tired of ragging on Jason for the cassette thing.

He takes out the mix tape Jason's been listening to and replaces it with one of the ones he snatched from the gas station last night. Jason hates the music he likes, so Tim tries to play it as loudly as possible whenever he can.

Earphones and sunglasses in place, Tim walks down past the discount furniture warehouse, the tattoo parlour, the charcoal chicken restaurant, and

the liquor store, to the train station. Outer suburbs are always quiet right before school gets out.

He buys a ticket, because he likes tickets. He's not sure why. He never used to. But now he does, so he buys one.

It's two stops to the local mall, and he spends the trip staring at the people in his carriage until they look anywhere but at him. Their discomfort makes him laugh, so he turns the volume on the walkman up until he can't hear himself.

The mall has a food court, and a cinema complex, and a supermarket. It's generic enough that Tim feels at home, and thinks that's the most searing critique on modern life he could think to make.

He goes to the pet store and watches all the puppies romping in the window. One of them looks up at him with big, dark eyes. Tim bares his teeth at it. It paws at the glass.

"Look at the wolves, Mommy!" a little girl says, leaving sticky fingerprints where she's put her palm against the shopfront.

"Those are dogs, honey," the mother corrects.

"Can we see if they have hamsters, too?"

They sound so normal and happy that Tim can't handle the idea of them looking at him, so he hurries away before they do.

He finds what he's looking for in the parking lot near the food court. Dealers who hover near after-school hang outs are as generic as malls.

"Look, I don't have any money, but I was wondering if we could work out..." Tim makes his eyes stray down. "Another way."

"Step into my office, kid," the dealer says with a smirk, and gestures to the darker recesses near the garbage bins.

Tim can't believe how easy life can be sometimes.

He has to ditch the sunglasses on account of the blood, so on his way back out through the mall he swipes a pair from a store. He makes sure that the clerk sees, and plays an enjoyable game of tag with the security guards up and down the escalators.

In a fit of inspiration, he stops abruptly and allows himself to be caught. He's marched into the staff-only area, and he smiles at the other kids waiting to get told off and photographed. One of them looks away. The other stares. Tim hums to himself, swinging his legs in time with a song that isn't playing. His clothes smell like blood, but all the stains are hidden.

Feeling bored sooner than he expected to be, he makes a break for it. He picks up the sunglasses on his way out, and manages to grab a plastic bag full of donuts off the rent-a-cop's desk as well. Stealing pastry goods always puts him in a good mood.

The train back out is full of schoolkids. Tim puts his earphones back on and turns the music up even louder. He doesn't like crowds.

People are sheep. And sometimes the dogs look just like the wolves.

His skin's burnt, even though he's barely been out and the sky's cloudy. That doesn't bother him. It'll make what he has in mind even better.

The stocky woman in the tattoo parlour gives him a sharp look when he drops a fistful of the dealer's money onto her equipment tray.

"I'm short for my age," he says, unzipping his jacket and shrugging it off his shoulders.

"You're short for a midget, kid," she says, and puts some alcohol on a cotton ball.

The back of his neck is pinked and tender, and he grips the back of the chair as he bends his head forward. Since he doesn't really care about what design he gets -- there isn't anything he wants -- he's going with just a line. If Jason gets pissy about it, he can pay for the laser removal.

At the first touch of the needle, Tim has to swallow a whimper.

He's not sure if it's the sting, or the electric whine, or the hand holding his shoulders still, but whatever it is it makes him feel like himself again.

In those days, those endless hours of shocks, and drugs, and dark rooms with Harley's coos, he'd tried so hard to hold onto himself. He'd tried to hide in memories, in hopes for the future, in stupid daydreams. Anything he could think of, he'd tried.

So now, like some fucked-up Pavlov dog, he finds himself in the situations where he'd clung the hardest to what that self had been.

"You okay, kid? You're kinda quiet there."

"Fine," Tim says through gritted teeth, as if that's anything like a truthful answer.

It's getting on to evening by the time he gets back to the motel, and Jason's singing along to some old pop song on the clock radio.

"Cooking in your boxers is disgusting. You're going to give me some disease," Tim says, flopping down onto the bed.

"Who says this is for you?" Jason flips the omelette and turns the heat down. "Do anything fun?"

"Got some donuts. Held a heart in my hands. It was weird. Like a little animal or something, moving around. Took a really long time to stop beating," Tim answers.

"Jesus, you fucking... we were going to stay here a few days, remember? Try to get some names to look up further down the road? Now we'll have to take off." Jason slams the frypan against the stove, swearing for a while longer. "He better have been the god-damn antichrist."

"He was selling overpriced, low-quality drugs to kids. And nobody'll find him for weeks, if they do at all. Did you eat the last of the salt and vinegar chips? Those cheese ones taste like shit, and I don't want anything else." Tim prods the pile of junk-food wrappers on the night stand.

Jason dumps the omelette onto two plates, carrying them over to the shaky table littered with weaponry. "You need real food. I'm not nursing you back to health if your system overloads from crap."

"Don't want an omelette."

Jason grips a fork, hard, and looks like he wants to swear again. Then he breathes. "Did you buy bananas?"

"Yeah. And pears."

"Make yourself a fucking banana milkshake, then. Put an egg in it. Nutrients, remember those? No, wait, on second thoughts, shut up and eat your

omelette. Nobody who rips hearts out for fun gets to be picky about breakfast."

"It's six p.m."

"And you'd better eat before it gets any later." Jason kicks the chair out. The scrape of the legs on the linoleum makes a screech.

Tim hauls himself off the bed and drags his feet on every step across the room.

"I don't want this," he mutters. Jason kicks him in the shin. "I don't." He prods the meal with his fork.

"I swear to God, if you lose your shit over a fucking omelette, I'm -" Jason lets the threat hang.

Tim gets up, carrying his fork with him. It fits in his palm comfortably. Maybe he'll take it with him when they get back on the road.

"Did you want to die?" he asks conversationally as he peels a banana and drops it into the medieval-looking blender. "At the end? When you knew how hurt you were?"

There's a clattering sound as Jason drops his own fork against the rim of the plate. "Can we talk about something else while I'm trying to eat my dinner?"

"Thought you said it was breakfast."

"Well, right now it doesn't look very appetising as either. Guess you've got solidarity for your choosy stomach."

Tim snickers. "Milkshake?"

Jason actually laughs, a little. "Sure, why not?... What happened to my sunglasses?"

"You needed an upgrade. You're years out of fashion, you know."

"If you're going to start on the cassette thing again..."

"Do you ever say anything but half-finished threats?" Tim asks, and turns the blender on before Jason can reply.

They fight about the radio, and drive in silence. When the town's nothing but a bright dot in the distance behind them, Tim climbs into the back and lies down. He likes the air when they use bikes. The wind on his skin keeps him grounded. But in cars he can try to sleep.

"Don't you puke milkshake over my bag back there," Jason says, meeting his eye in the rear-view mirror.

"That another threat?"

"An order."

Tim gives a salute which turns one-fingered on its way back down.

"Punk."

"Fuckface."

"Oh, that's mature," Jason says, and taps his fingers on the steering wheel.

PIECES

(part of the 'The Red and the Black' series, which can be found at <http://evenrobins.net>)

Superman's the first one to tell her. He looks younger when he furrows his brow, the worry-creases endearing in a way which makes Babs wish she could be disgusted with herself for melting a little at the sight.

Superman says that Batman's been to visit him.

"He wanted to talk about death. More specifically, what happens when death -"

"Doesn't quite take?" Babs cuts in. Superman nods.

"Who?" she asks. There are so many it could be.

"I think... Jason," Superman says, but he doesn't say it like he thinks it. He says it like he knows.

Babs' mouth curls up into what she can feel is a crooked smile.

"Of course," she says. "Why should he be any better at leaving it behind than the rest of us?"

Several months later -- eventful months, but no moreso than they ever are -- she's reading reports of Harvey Dent's murder scene and her coffee's going cold in the mug beside her keyboard.

It's easy to imagine what Jason would have looked like as he fired the killing shot. She can still remember the only night she worked beside him, the way his face went from fury-red to blank and cold in a heartbeat. It's no effort to impose that on the dry language of the homicide report.

No, it's not the final wound which gives her pause and puzzlement. It's the aim-to-hurt ones.

Anyone who's ever operated in Gotham knows how the big names work. Even without a perfect memory, Babs could tell a knot tied by an Ivy-controlled minion from one done by a Scarecrow victim. There are quirks to look for.

Jason shoots just like he always did, and he's got a friend who fires like Harley Quinn.

The call comes almost two weeks after the Riddler's body turns up with a hole through its heart.

The connection's bounced through a few relay points, enough that it takes her almost thirty seconds to fix on his location. He stays quiet as she does so.

"It's nice to have an opponent who makes an effort to challenge my intelligence," Babs says when she's locked the address in.

"Opponent? Makes it all sound so damn civil. Like we're sparring."

She can hear him tap a key. Her tracking software jitters for a moment before reasserting itself.

"Aren't we?" She smiles, and shuts his system down. He swears.

"It's times like that that I wonder why you didn't pick Cock-Blocker as a name. Forget this 'Oracle' bullshit."

"What do you want?"

"Can't it be that I just wanted to hear your melodious tones? We never did have that sleepover I promised. Though, if we're talking specific requests, I would like to put a vote in for not getting the shit beat out of me by Canary or Huntress. I'm making this call on the faith that that won't happen."

She waits.

Jason sighs. He still sounds like an annoying little brother. "I need your help."

"I can't give you information. That's not how this whole hero-villain thing works."

"No, not that," he snaps. "You. Black's... there's this kid, and he needs checking out, and I know you can do it. I'm saying truce, okay? It's important."

He's no better at keeping petulance out of his voice than he ever was. Babs wonders if everyone

he's spoken to has done what she's doing, comparing who he is with who he used to be.

"You're joking."

"When I'm joking, it's funnier than this. Come on, would I have contacted you if I could think of any other possible option? We'll go wherever you want."

Babs pinches the bridge of her nose. Her Very Bad Idea detector pings loudly. "Okay. I'll come to you."

Babs is fairly sure that she's used up every single one of her little-white-lie points with her team long ago, but nobody questions it when she says she has personal business in Gotham. Zinda drives her to the almost absurdly nondescript, cookie-cutter town house Jason gave her the address for.

If Babs tried to explain her reasons, she knows they would sound insane. The city's criminals, costumed and otherwise, are vanishing at an alarming rate. Communication between the heroes -- those who are speaking at all, that is -- is little more than a jumble of hearsay and confused recollection. To meet Jason on his own turf is not merely stupid; it's lunacy.

But nobody else was there. None of the others have ever known what it's like to hear the world end with a laugh.

There's a Batgirl now, and a Robin, and a Barbara, and even a Jason, but even with all the pieces present, there're things which were stolen. And he's the one who knows.

He's waiting by the front door. There aren't any steps leading up to it, which Babs is glad of. Just because she's ignoring her better judgement and

trusting him doesn't mean she's in any hurry to show weakness where he can see.

Jason's in street clothes, and looks just like an ordinary kid. A smarmy, smirking one with something hard and ugly in the twist of his mouth, but still a kid. No older than Cassandra, and he's still got those damned baby-blue eyes.

"Long time no see," he says lazily, and she wants to ask if it really was for him. "I need to explain some stuff before you come in."

"I'll be in the car, Skipper," Zinda says, touching Babs' shoulder. "You need me, you holler, got it?"

Babs nods.

When they're alone in the relative quiet of the empty street -- the neighbourhood is gentrified enough that to seem lived-in would spoil the effect -- Jason leans against the door into the house.

"He's a Timmy. From somewhere pretty different to here. Well, as different as this shithole of a place ever gets. Or maybe he's not all Timmy. There's a lot of other stuff in there too." He pushes a hand through his hair and shakes his head. "There was a thing in his neck. A mind warp implant chip, or whatever the name for shit like that is. I've checked him over a bunch of times for other ones, but I can't pick up subcutaneous ones, or nanotech, or anything like that just by looking and prodding.

"I picked you for the job because I think he misses you a lot."

"He's never even met me," Babs points out, her voice gentle enough to surprise herself.

"His Babs. Whatever. You know what I mean." Jason shrugs helplessly. "They were friends. He

doesn't exactly have an abundance of those anymore."

She wants to ask 'so why do you care?', but maybe the answer to that's to be found in his own words. Killing the wicked in Gotham City greatly reduces the number of people who will call you an ally, on either side of the coin.

"I figured you'd understand him pretty well, too. I hope you will," Jason adds as he opens the door for her. "I'll be out here."

Either he's a much better liar than he used to be, or he's basically telling the truth, so Babs plays the gamble and goes inside. The building's all but totally unfurnished; a pair of boots and some candy wrappers are the only hint that anyone's been inside at all. There's a layer of dust over the floorboards, thick enough that her chair leaves visible tracks behind it as she moves.

"He's set up a bunch of stuff in here," a voice calls to her from deeper inside the small house. If the Tim she knows got doped up on nitrous, brought down by shock, and didn't sleep for a week, he might sound like that.

This Tim's sitting on the edge of a chipped, cheap dining table. Various pieces of medical testing equipment, chosen seemingly at random, dot the floor and any other flat surfaces.

Jason looked like he belonged in his jeans and shirt, but this Tim is obviously just wearing the clothes he'll tolerate until it's time for him to really dress. The threadbare t-shirt hangs off him like one day he'll vanish inside it entirely. The cuffs of his jeans pool over the tops of his bare feet. Even his toes are heavily scarred. The skin of his arms isn't a

roadmap of markings so much as it's an abstract rendering of the surface of hell.

"You've got grafts too," he says, his nightmare-carnival voice sounding surprised. He points to the faint, fading scars on her arms. "I knew about the wheelchair, but not that."

She glances down, then nods. "I had a little run-in with Brainiac. Not unlike what happened to you, I hear."

Among the older tears on his forearm, there's a new, still-stitched gash. Tim flicks at the black knots of surgical thread with his thumb and forefinger as he answers. "Guess some things stay predictable, even when everything else is crazy. I don't think I have any more chips in me. Red got freaked out when we were out. Passing through a metal detector made me -" his mouth twitches, a sound like a high sob or laugh escaping his throat between words. "- go a little funny. But I don't think it was chips."

She can't ask. She can't hear his answer, even though she already knows what turned him into this.

She remembers the horrible, sick hours she and the others spent believing their own Tim was dead, when Joker unleashed his serum on the villain population. She remembers, with nauseating clarity, how much she wanted Joker to die then. She remembers it now because she feels it again.

"He had a camera," Tim says, like he knows what she's thinking. He sounds like he's talking about something he watched in a movie. "Some days I think that was the worst bit. Some days I don't."

She covers her eyes with her palm.

"Sorry. I shouldn't -" another almost-laugh derails his words momentarily. "- shouldn't, shouldn't say that stuff to you."

"It's all right." How close was she to becoming this? There was more than one day... more than fifty, when she felt like she was going crazy. How near to that edge did she wander?

"This is from Zsasz," he tells her, obviously deciding a change of subject's in order. God, she thinks. Even his smile is scars. He's still fiddling with the new cut on his arm. "I thought that was funny. That he got the chance to put a tally-mark for his own death. I want to hug you so much right now but I think you probably hate me."

His tone doesn't shift between the topics, so it takes her a few seconds to catch up on what's been said. Then, wordlessly, she opens her arms.

He all but throws himself at her, clinging like he'll die if he doesn't hold on with all his might, broken-doll face buried against her neck. Babs imagines that this is what her Tim would be, if all his defences and filters were stripped away from him.

"Joker should be dead. He needs to be," she says, and means it as deeply as she ever has.

"In my world, I..." Another gust of shaky, unwell laughter puffs damply against her skin. "Shot him. In the heart. He said it wasn't funny, but I can't stop..."

The laughter's almost a scream this time, his slight body shaking with the force of it. Babs can't tell when, exactly, it tips over into sobs, but they go on for a long time. She holds him.

"I'm glad it was one of us," she whispers. He'll understand. He's working with Jason.

"Batgirl," Tim says, choked, and holds her tight enough that she knows she'll bruise. This time, his tears sound less like nothing will ever be right again.

Eventually, she does scan him as best she can with the available equipment. It seems that, physically, Tim is as intact as he'll ever be.

"Will I ever play the piano again?" he asks as she finishes. "Or the tuba? Or the theremin?"

Robins. She'll never be free of them.

When she gets outside, Jason's sitting in the car with Zinda, talking animatedly.

"... and the band played 'sounds of silence'. You know it, right? Or was that after your time?"

"That story's getting on to five years old," Babs says as she pulls one of the back-seat doors open. Zinda hurries around from her own seat to help Babs in, and Jason chooses to be endlessly difficult and slide out the window. He's agile, for someone with his bulk.

"It holds up as a modern classic," Jason retorts.

Babs resists an urge to roll her eyes. "He's fine," she tells him instead. "No nanobots in his bloodstream, no irregular electrical activity. He suggested I should give your brainwaves a look."

Jason shakes his head. "Some other time. It's not important."

"How long's our truce lasting?" She can't condone what he's doing, but she won't condemn it

either. Not while her collar's still bearing the signs of Tim's messy crying fit.

"If the Birds stay out of my way, I'll stay out of theirs," he answers.

She nods. It'll do for now.

There's nothing else to say, so Jason goes inside and Zinda drives away.

As they reach the end of the street, Babs wonders if Jason and Tim chose that house to meet her at because it was wheelchair-friendly.

"I liked him," Zinda volunteers in the quiet. "He's funny. Reminds me of the guys I knew back in the day. Was he ever a soldier?"

"Some would say so," Babs answers, and watches the world go past outside her window.

